Inclusion of Autistic Students in High School: 'Wired Differently, Not Weirdly Different'

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education (Inclusive & Specialised Education), Flinders University

College of Education, Psychology and Social Work

September 2024

Contents

Glossary

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.
AERO	Australian Education Research Organisation.
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder.
2eASD	Twice exceptional ASD, intellectually gifted and autistic.
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority.
CDYA	Children and Young People with Disability Australia.
DECD	South Australian Department for Education and Child Development.
DSM-V	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders No 5.
DI	Differentiated Instruction.
HREC	Human Resource Ethics Committee – Flinders University.
IU	Intolerance of Uncertainty.
OCD	Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.
POD	A dedicated learning and support area for students.
POD Lines	Timetabled POD lessons to assist academic growth.
SLD	Specific Learning Disability.
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
UDL	Universal Design for Learning.

Declaration

I declare that:

This dissertation entitled: *Inclusion of Autistic Students in High School: 'Wired Differently, Not Weirdly Different'* presents work carried out by me and does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university.

To the best of my knowledge, it does not contain any materials previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and all substantive contributions by others to the work presented, including jointly authored publications, is clearly acknowledged.

Graham Forbes

September 2024

and knowledge that Bev brought to my learning process. It has been a privilege to have been supervised by Bev and any deficiencies in this research report are absolutely mine, arising from my own limitations.

It is imperative that I also acknowledge a group of people who may never see this report. They are the autistic students I have had the good fortune to work with. They have been my primary teachers and tutors over the last six years, and it has been an extraordinary journey of introduction and then immersion in a world that was so different to all my lived experiences. I am deeply honoured and grateful for the young people who trusted me with their frustrations, anxieties and fears, and shared their dreams, passions, and unique world view. They helped me learn their language, feel what they were feeling, and connect to their strengths. It has been a journey with great meaning and value, and many tears of joy. I am thankful also to the parents who shared the complex, challenging life that they grapple with on a daily basis, and I respect and value the knowledge they have accumulated over years of finding what works and what doesn't work for their unique child.

This research report is dedicated to all of the above in recognition of their contributions.

Terminology

Within the autistic community there is a continuing discussion on how an autistic person should be referred to. For this research, I have adopted the language choices and definitions decided on by the developers of the South Australian Government's Autism Strategy 2024-2029. This is a move away from the medical model with its focus on disabilities and disorders to an identity-first focus referring to individuals as an autistic person. Autism is seen as one of many natural variations in the wide diversity of minds.

> Autism is a neurological developmental difference that impacts the way an Autistic person sees, experiences, understands and responds to the world.
>
> Every person's lived experience of autism is different(Government of South Australia, 2024, p. 9).

The term neurodiversity is used to denote the wide range of variances in the development and functioning of the human mind. Neurotypical refers to individuals who have the most common form of cognitive functioning and neurodivergent refers to the conditions where the brain development and functioning has diverged from the typical brain. This research examines the experiences of the participants from the perspective that there is no 'normal' brain(Armstrong, 2015).

The word 'requirements' is used wherever the word 'needs' might be traditionally used in reference to students with disabilities, affirming the students' *rights* as part of inclusive education . It might be argued that 'adjustments' is a more appropriate word, as this is the generally acknowledged way of supporting and assisting students with extra needs, but this research highlighted circumstances where adjustments are operating on the edges of the status quo when the status quo itself requires change to meet the expectations of inclusivity for all.

To maintain the anonymity of the participants, they are indicated as P1 – P5 (participant 1 to participant 5) and gender-neutral pronouns have been used when they are being referred to.

Abstract

Inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools has been steadily rising over the past two decades, but very few studies have asked autistic students whether they have felt included. This study examined the lived experience of five autistic students aged 17- 18 who had just graduated from a mainstream high school. A phenomenological research approach used semi-structured interviews to explore the degree to which they felt safe, accepted and understood at their school. These phenomena were considered as essential conditions to enable them to competently engage with academic study and school activities.

The narratives from these interviews revealed that the students said they did not feel safe due to bullying and other forms of peer aggression based on non-acceptance of their differences by peers. They said they felt more tolerated than accepted by staff and peers, needing to hide their differences in order to 'blend in,' and there was inadequate understanding of their unique requirements. Sub-themes emerged of primary school experiences that were reported by participants as being unsupportive and traumatising in some circumstances. All participants said they recognised that they were negatively seen as 'weird' throughout their schooling, and the support, assistance and interventions offered in high school were valued but unintentionally further stigmatised them. They said that a lack of understanding of autism and their individual requirements left them feeling that they were on the outer, not protected from aggression based on non-acceptance of differences, and experiencing environments and teaching practices that did not accommodate their sensitivities or adequately facilitate them to perform at their best.

The implication of the research is that current practices and supports for autistic students may not result in the students feeling included as equals in mainstream school settings. Their perception of the absence of understanding and acceptance of neurodiversity leaves them open to being negatively defined as weirdly different and 'lesser', rather than merely 'wired differently' and deserving to be equally valued and respected.

Embracing neurodiversity requires a school-wide autism awareness program and the implementation of organisational and pedagogical changes that address autism issues in ways that are non-stigmatising and beneficial for all students. This research confirms the importance of regularly seeking to understand the lived experiences of autistic students.

1 Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

1.1 Introduction

Inclusivity has become a philosophical theme, legal requirement, and a pedagogical objective in education systems around the world since the *Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994)*. Inclusion is generally taken to mean the involvement of students with disabilities in mainstream schools, in a way that ensures all their requirements are met and they are not stigmatised by the processes of inclusion(Leifler, 2022). Three decades later, the degree to which this occurs for students with neurodivergence is not clear, due possibly to the hidden nature of some neurological differences (Pearson, 2012) and a lack of pedagogies specifically developed for neurodivergent students and the failure to implement evidence based pedagogies.(Dickinson et al., 2023).

In 2019 a large metropolitan l high school experienced a significant increase in enrolment of students who were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), or later found to have ASD, with 14 new enrolments commencing their high school education This resulted in some subject classes having two or more autistic students. This cohort of students completed high school at the end of 2023 having experienced a period of increased awareness in the school of the challenges autism presented and an openness to develop different management procedures and pedagogies. A qualitative research methodology was considered best to examine their lived experiences of feeling safe, accepted and understood because,

inclusion is a feeling (a sense of belonging), not a place (mainstream or otherwise)(Goodall, 2020, p. 1285)

This chapter discusses the background to the study, impetus for the research, significance of the study, research question, presumptions and expectations, and the dissertation structure.

1.2 Background

The Salamanca World Conference established the moral and legal right for students with disabilities to be included in mainstream schools and receive equitable quality education. This has been endorsed and re-inforced by the Australian Government (*Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, 2024) and strengthened by standards (*Disability Standards for Education 2005*) which require educators to apply suitable adjustments to curricula and teaching practices to ensure that students with disabilities can access education like any other student. Over the three decades since that decision of the United Nations, students with disabilities have been enrolled in mainstream schools in increasing numbers. By 2018, in Australia, 89% of students with disabilities were attending mainstream schools(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024). This study focuses more narrowly on whether attendance at a mainstream school has resulted in inclusion and equitable education by exploring the experiences of five autistic students at one high school. The aim of the study was to hear the voices of the students and their feelings of being safe, accepted and understood.

To understand their experiences, it is necessary to look at the context of their acceptance into the school. There are differing interpretations of the meaning of inclusion across mainstream schools in Australia, ranging from full immersion of students with disabilities in standard environments and with standard pedagogical practices, to separate facilities and different pedagogies on the premises of a mainstream schoo with occasional involvement in mainstream activities. While this would be more appropriately defined as integration, there is a continuum from exclusion through integration to full inclusion that is considered to qualify as inclusion. What defines equitable quality education may also differ amongst teachers within schools(de Boer, 2011). Linda Graham (2020) maintains that equitable "means fair" and "does not mean the same"(p. 19). It is a process of "giving more to those who have less to equalise opportunity" (p. 19) which can occur in inclusive settings but presents challengesThis study explores student reported experiences in a school that is committed to the including students with diagnosed disabilities in all school activities and provides specialised supports and interventions in mainstream classes and dedicated additional support facilities.

1.3 Impetus for the Research

I have been working with the participants involved in this research as an Inclusive Education teacher for the five years of their high school education. Over this period there has been an increasing awareness of neurodivergence as numbers of students have risen, but my interaction with teachers over those years and a review of current research suggests that teachers may not have sufficient training and resources to effectively respond to autistic students' requirements. In a major

examination of the opinions of Australian students and parents, 49% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed, that there had been adequate support in their education(Dickinson et al., 2023).

> Support staff had no disability training, teacher training was generic and not reflective of current inclusion standards/ideals. There appeared to be no inclusion training(p. 15).

Looking back over the past years I have seen improvements in behaviour, attendance, academic achievements and social participation with this group of autistic students, but I have no certainty as to what has been effective and beneficial and what has not worked. For this reason, I considered it necessary to ask the students themselves, for me to understand their lived experiences of their high school years. Such a phenomenological approach appears to have been sadly lacking in the research on inclusivity for autistic students(Adams, 2020; Goodall, 2020; Rasmussen & Pagsberg, 2019; Roberts & Simpson, 2016). I have a personal interest in knowing whether the school's best intentions and my efforts to understand and respond to their requirements contributed to the quality of their high school experience. Apart from their academic progress, I particularly wanted to know if they felt included as 'equals' in their high school.

1.4   Significance of the Study

Over the past decade diagnoses of autism have steadily increased in Australia with 1 in 52 being diagnosed (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019) with increasing numbers enrolling in mainstream schools. There was a 25.1% increase between 2015 and 2018 of autistic individuals in Australia, with 106,600 autistic students aged 5–20 years attending schools or educational programs(White, 2023). These students have been seen as having deficits requiring special support and educational adjustments to assist them to succeed in mainstream classes. From this perspective, the main purpose of pedagogical approaches for autistic students appears to be designed to assist them to be like their neurotypical classmates(Botha, 2022). This process may have the effect of further stigmatising autistic students and perpetuate responses based on misunderstandings, which lead to higher levels of exclusions for neurodivergent students(Maïano, 2016).

Efforts to provide successful inclusive educational responses for students with special requirements are undermined by a lack of understanding of neurodivergence and a generally negative, deficit focus,(Botha, 2022; Bottema-Beutel, 2021). This failure to understand is seen by many autistic advocates as the result of not asking autistic students themselves what they need and what works for them.

A systematic review of autism research priorities studies found that only 9% of participants were autistic(Roche, 2021).

This research was designed to capture the experience of a cohort of students who had just completed their last year of high school. This study explores not just what they said they experienced, but how they evaluated and said they were affected by those experiences. The outcomes of this research should provide valuable information for the school to address factors negatively affecting autistic students' sense of safety, acceptance and being understood.

1.5   The Research Question

In the absence of a single agreed definition of what inclusion might look or feel like to a secondary school autistic student [12], Nason (2020) proposed a concept of *Safe and Accepted* as essential requirements for successful inclusion. Nason argues that all persons tend to thrive when they feel safe and accepted and this is a pre-requisite to developing competence(pp. 12-13). He defines acceptance as being understood, valued, and respected(p. 13).

Not being understood was a common cry I heard from many of the students I interacted with in circumstances where they appeared to be accepted in the school community, so I took it as important to them and distinct from acceptance. Not being understood can be explained in part by the phenomena where both neurotypical and neurodivergent people are not aware that they see the world in different ways are often communicating in different ways (Milton et al., 2022). This is known as the 'Double Empathy Paradox' which will be explored further in Chapter 2. The importance of being understood was also highlighted by Goodall (2020) in his study of young autistic students. I have therefore expanded this concept for autistic students *to feel Safe, Accepted and Understood* as essential criteria for inclusion for the purpose of this research. The research question is about how safe, accepted and understood did five autistic students feel over their years of high school.

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[1]

Booth, T., Ainscow, M., & Centre for Studies on Inclusive, E. (2002). *Index for inclusion : developing learning and participation in schools* (Rev. ed.). CSIE. provides useful guidelines and discussion topics on how schools might define inclusion for their purposes.

1.6   Presumptions and Expectations

I worked as an Inclusive Education teacher with all of the participants through their high school years and I was reasonably confident that they would provide an honest view without just saying what they thought to be acceptable. As highly articulate and intelligent students, I assumed they would have considered views on the value and quality of their experiences, and probably had a fairly positive view of their high school experiences. I expected that they would provide useful feedback on the ways the school had tried to support autistic students and offer constructive information on areas for improvement, as well as processes that had been helpful.

1.7   Dissertation Structure

This dissertation consists of eight chapters. The first chapter introduces the study explaining the impetus for the study, the significance of the study, the research question and some presumptions and expectations. Chapter two is a review of literature that examines the degree to which autistic students have felt safe, accepted and understood in a mainstream school. Chapter three addresses the context in which the students experienced high school education. This includes the nature of their school, its values and approach to staff development, specialist actions and interventions for students with special requirements. Chapter four outlines the research design and Chapters five to eight detail the findings, discussion and conclusions.

1.8   Methodology

A phenomenological research approach was chosen as an effective way of enabling autistic students in the high school to give voice to their feelings of inclusion in a mainstream setting. Semi structured interviews were used to facilitate the research participants to express their feelings about how safe, accepted and understood they felt in the school over their five years of attendance. The recorded interviews were transcribed and returned to the interviewees for their approval, alteration or addition. A Hermeneutic Circling approach (Crowther, 2017) was then used, involving the creation of crafted stories from themes that emerged in each interview, describing and interpreting these stories, re-listening to the recorded interviews and refining the crafted stories. From this process common themes emerged that are examined in the discussion of the research findings.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the reason for the research, instigated by the graduation of a cohort of autistic students that I had worked closely with, and my observation that teachers did not have a

strong understanding of autism. The significance of the study lies in the increase in numbers of autistic students in mainstream schools with little direct evidence based on lived experience that their inclusion has been successful. A phenomenological research methodology was chosen for its effectiveness in drawing out the emotional experiences of the phenomena of feeling safe, accepted and understood. The next chapter explores the current literature of the experiences of autistic students in mainstream high school classes.

2   Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1   Introduction

This literature review seeks to examine the experiences of neuro-divergent students, specifically those who are autistic, in secondary schools. The primary objective was to review research related to the evidence of autistic students feeling safe, accepted and understood in mainstream schooling. As much as possible the review has focused on research and articles informed by the voices of neurodivergent students. The retrospective views of neurodivergent adults have been helpful, but it has the limitation of not always being current. In the light of the rapid increase in inclusive policies over the past decade, most references have been limited to those from 2015 onwards. Figure 1 below shows the significant increase in research related publications on autistic students in high school since 2015.

Scholarly Publications on Autism and Student Inclusion in High School, 2013 - 2023
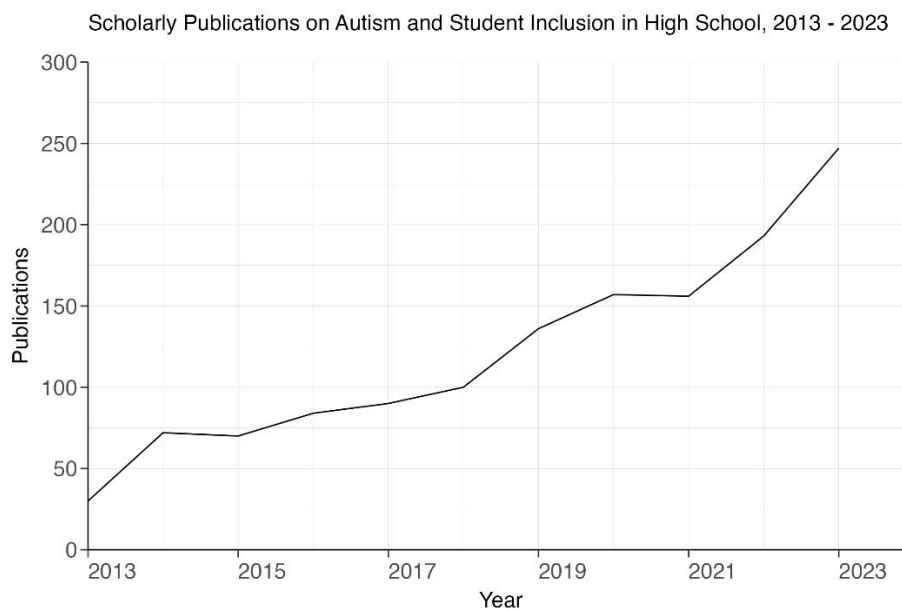
Figure 1 Data from Scopus retrieved 15/06/2024

2.2   Phenomenon 1 – Feeling Safe

Safety is cited as a significant consideration in some research, usually in reference to bullying which has been defined as "aggressive behaviour that is repetitive, intentional, and physically or emotionally hurtful" and involving an imbalance in power(Maïano, 2016, p. 601). In this meta-analysis of school bullying and victimisation, it was estimated that nearly one in every two autistic young persons has experienced at least one form of bullying (p. 602). For high school students this was more likely to be

verbal bullying, where the incidences rise to more than half of autistic students reported as having been verbally bullied at some stage of their school life (p. 610). A study of the lived experience of eight twice exceptional (2eASD) autistic students found that all of them had experienced bullying as a direct result of their perceived differences(Ronksley-Pavia, 2019).

Inability to form successful friendship relationships and achieve satisfactory peer acceptance is identified as leaving autistic students vulnerable to bullying, resulting in reported incidents significantly higher than neurotypical students and still higher when compared to other students with special educational requirements(Brede et al., 2017; Hebron, 2014; Sproston et al., 2017). The real level of bullying experienced by autistic students may be much higher due to a narrow perception as to what constitutes bullying. In a worldwide investigation of self-reported harm by peers involving over 6000 adolescents, Skrzypiec et al (2018) found that aggressive behaviour by peers that did not meet the traditional definition of bullying, caused significant harm to as many respondents as those who experienced the accepted criteria of bullying, "intended harm, repetition and power imbalance"(p. 102). The authors argued that a broader concept of peer aggression should be used instead of bullying and the degree of harm experienced by a victim should be the focus of attention and support (pp. 115-116).

Of equal importance was the impact of sensory overload on the ability to cope in stressful situations, leading to not feeling physically or emotionally safe. Students report that schools were not built for them, citing experiences where rooms are too bright, too loud and lacking safe spaces for quiet re-generation(Brede et al., 2017; Sproston et al., 2017). For many neurodivergent students, hypersensitivity of one or more of their senses means they are constantly in a state of sensory defensiveness and the need to control everything around them in order to feel safe(Nason, 2019). Latest research on the neurobiology of sensory hyper-sensitivity indicates that coping with overstimulating environments is a distraction that causes anxiety and significant exhaustion(Waisman & Simmons, 2018). In a study undertaken with university students, self-reporting revealed that between 78% and 87% had experienced a sensory overload in their classroom that significantly affected their learning(Waisman et al., 2022).

The most significant indicator of safety at school might be the issue of students declaring their neurodivergence. Masking is seen as a widespread behaviour of autistic people(Pearson et al., 2021), designed for them to appear more 'able' and reduce the chance of stigmatisation which can have significant social and health consequences(O'Connor, 2023). Masking is considered to be a necessary response to a social and emotional reality where the autistic person is seen as 'lesser' and deficient.

This is not in the imagination of autistic people as 80% of behavioural characteristics considered essential to the diagnosis of autism are viewed negatively by non-autistic persons.

> We move, communicate and think in ways that those who do not move, communicate and think in those ways struggle to empathise with, or understand, so they 'Other' us, pathologize us and exclude us for it. (Wood, 2016)

The higher incidences of truancy, school refusal and suspensions of neurodivergent students would suggest that being different might not be safe for many students. Such incidences have been estimated as three times that of neurotypical students(Adams, 2020).

2.3 Phenomenon 2 – Feeling Accepted

Attendance at a school is only the beginning of the issue of acceptance. Enrolment in a mainstream school is not a guarantee of inclusion based on the experience of a significant minority of autistic students. An examination by three autism support agencies of the Scottish Government's vision of *Excellence and equity for all* and the supportive program *Included, Engaged and Involved* (Scottish Government, 2019) resulted in their own report *Not Included, Not Engaged and Not Involved(Autism, 2018)*. One thousand, four hundred and seventeen parents responded to a questionnaire with 71% of them reporting that their child had missed school for reasons other than childhood illnesses and 85% of them said there had been no help to catch up on missed work regardless of the reasons for an absence. Twenty eight percent of students had been restricted to part time attendance, some lasting over 12 months, with one parent reporting that part time attendance was instituted immediately after a hospital had suggested the child might be autistic(p. 18).

However, in terms of systemic acceptance in schools, appropriate accommodations, adjustments, and learning supports are becoming widespread as an important basic response to inclusion of students with extra requirements. Actions such as providing modified curricula, additional time for tests and examinations, opportunity to have movement breaks, quiet places for self-regulation, 1:1 learning support from teacher aides are all seen as welcoming and accepting responses to students with extra requirements(Costley et al., 2021). In a recent report from the *Children and Young People with Disabilities Australia* (CDYA), parents, care givers and students from all states when asked: "Are schools welcoming and supportive?" 61% of 379 respondents strongly agreed or agreed, and only 20% strongly disagreed or disagreed with the proposition (Dickinson et al., 2023, p. 2).

One of the key issues for autistic students is anxiety. In comparison to neurotypical students, anxiety of at least one form is reported in up to 40% of autistic people but only 15% of non-autistic persons(Van Steensel et al., 2011). In the study previously mentioned, (Ronksley-Pavia, 2019), all twice

exceptional autistic students experienced significant anxiety related to hostile school environments and negative reactions to their giftedness and disabilities. In addition to the prevalence of anxiety is the discovery that for autistic students, anxiety increases as they age, whereas it decreases for neurotypical students(Kuusikko et al., 2008). This makes anxiety a critical issue for schools to address as part of inclusion of students with extra requirements. In addition to the more obvious adaptations such as movement passes, quiet spaces, adjustments to curricula and tests detailed by Costley et al.(2021), reduction in uncertainty is also a critical issue for anxious students. Intolerance of uncertainty, (IU), has been identified as something different to fear of the unknown or dislike of change(Hodgson et al., 2017), and is considered to be a common trait among autistic students. Schools can minimise this through clear and consistent timetabling and communication processes, but in high schools with constant changes of room, subject, and teacher, uncertainty becomes a norm requiring the neurodivergent student to navigate a physical environment that does not convey any recognition of their requirements for feeling accepted into the school(Graham, 2020). This is defined more as integration not inclusion, because the autistic student is required to do the bulk, if not all, of the adjusting to the institutional requirements (p. 20).

2.4   Phenomenon 3 - Feeling Understood

While responses to feeling accepted were generally positive, deeper analysis of high school experiences reveal a less welcoming reality. *The Children and Young People with Disabilities Australia* (CDYA), reports that 49% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed, while only 38% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "The student receives/received adequate support in their education"(Dickinson et al., 2023, p. 14). As one respondent commented,

> Support staff had no disability training, teacher training was generic and not reflective of current inclusion standards/ideals. There appeared to be no inclusion training (p. 15)

When students and families were asked whether they thought that "The teachers and support staff have the training required to provide a supportive and enriching education environment for the student", only 28% agreed or strongly agreed, while 53% disagreed or strongly disagreed(p. 15). This issue has been examined by a range of studies, all of which confirm that there may be a willingness by teachers to be inclusive and supportive, but they lack the training and resources to be successful(Cologon, 2019).

A lack of understanding of the basis of some behaviours also has significant impact on autistic students. High anxiety is recognised as a common experience of most autistic people but what is not understood is that their anxiety may be expressed as aggressive behaviour, particularly amongst boys.

The lack of understanding of anxiety inducing conditions results in a limited range of school responses(Mazefsky et al., 2013). Autistic students are much more likely to be excluded from mainstream schools than students without extra requirements. Permanent exclusion is reported to be as much as 8 to 20 times more likely for an autistic student(Goodall, 2018). The relationship between inappropriate school environments and lack of understanding and support for autistic students and eventual exclusion for short or extended periods is also highlighted by Sproston et al. (2017) and Brede et al. (2017

A study of autistic children examining their self-reported experiences at home, school and the community revealed that 96.5% of the sample group experienced significant anxiety in at least one of those settings, with approximately half reporting anxiety at school which is unrecognised by adults(Adams, 2020).

The lack of understanding felt by autistic students is also attributed to what has been referred to as the "double empathy paradigm" (or paradox)(Milton, 2012, p. 3). Research has shown that neurodivergent people can communicate quite successfully with other neurodivergent people, but not successfully with neurotypical people and the same applies in reverse for neurotypical people. The paradox is that neither the neurotypical person nor the neurodivergent person realises that they are not being interpreted as they intend. The consequence of communication misunderstandings is for both parties to believe that the other lacks empathy and neurodivergent students become reluctant to express their opinions, believing that they are not being listened to or valued. This leads to isolation and exclusion, rather than inclusion and understanding (Botha & Frost, 2020).

In the best of current circumstances in most high schools, adjustments and adaptations are developed to compensate for defined difficulties experienced by autistic students, but this approach may add to the sense of not being understood, accepted or included. While this approach is helpful for individual neurodivergent students, it is based on the identification of deficits which can have the effect of confirming differences that lead to bullying and exclusion(Brede et al., 2017; Shmulsky et al., 2022). A recent study based on the lived experiences of parents of autistic students found that most parents felt that acceptance and understanding was lacking, and school systems "failed to consider autistic students, working to their detriment"(Cleary, 2024, p. 473). Autistic students experienced higher instances of exclusion from school in a variety of ways as a result of factors such as "sensory or cognitive overload, a lack of training in neurodiversity for teachers, an absent sense of safety by the student at school, or poor attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic students in schools" (p. 468).

2.5   Review Summary

Since the Salamanca (1994) declaration of the right for students with disabilities to be educated in mainstream settings there has been a significant increase in enrolments of students who are neurodivergent. The focus on inclusive education has been endorsed and promoted by education systems across the world and enthusiastically welcomed by parents. However, there is substantial concern that this change has happened ahead of the development of suitable pedagogies to ensure that inclusion is achieved. There is also not universal agreement as to what constitutes successful inclusion. Further exacerbating the task of determining whether the laudable objectives are being translated into successful outcomes, very little research has involved the students themselves. At this point there is sufficient evidence to say that a sizeable proportion of neurodivergent students do not feel safe due to bullying, sensory overloads and exclusionary actions based on their differences(Ronksley-Pavia et al., 2019; Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012). Acceptance is a little more positive with general compliance with their right to be in the classroom and the support, adaptations and special provisions put in place for their benefit providing some sense of belonging.

Where the process is most lacking is the understanding of the reality of neurodivergence; the daily challenges facing students, the hostile nature of the normal school environment, the conscious and unconscious attitudes that define them as negatively different, and the physical, emotional and mental exhaustion they battle on a regular basis(Brede et al., 2017; Goodall, 2018; Sproston et al., 2017). The CYDA education survey in comparing results over several surveys concluded

> that outcomes may not be moving in the desired direction across areas such as bullying, inclusion and educational support – pointing to a stagnation in improvements for students with disability in Australia.(Dickinson et al., 2023, p. 6).the

In the next chapter, I look at the context of this research, the nature of the students, their school context and myself as the researcher.

3   Chapter 3: Context of the Study

3.1   Introduction

In this chapter, the nature of autism is briefly examined, and the l High School context (the site of the research) is explored including the culture of the school and specific structures and interventions which the research cohort would have experienced. The background and role of the researcher is also detailed.

3.2   Defining Autism

Autism is defined as a spectrum because of the wide range of characteristics and the spread of abilities included in the diagnosis. The medical diagnosis of autism documents external behaviours that are considered to be negative or aberrant characteristics, deficiency in specific skills, or a significant deviation from a norm (Nason, 2020) . The diagnosis is further differentiated by common co-occurring conditions such ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), Intellectual Disabilities, and (SLD) Specific Learning Disability as defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* V (DSM V)(Regier et al., 2013). More recently a further subset of the autism spectrum identified but not yet included in DSM V, are those individuals who have exceptional cognitive abilities in conjunction with ASD. These individuals are referred to as twice exceptional (2eASD), being both gifted and having a disability, (Callahan, 2017; Ronksley-Pavia, 2019)

However, these medical model definitions do not take account of the full reality of the autistic person, their strengths, how they perceive and interact with the world around them, and the different ways their neurology processes information. Fortunately, an alternative approach to diagnosis that has a strengths based focus has been developed. Called the 'National Guideline for the assessment and diagnosis of autism in Australia', it has recently been endorsed by the National Health and Medical Research Council.(Autism CRC, 2024)

We cannot begin to understand the behaviours that supposedly define autistic people until we have some insight to how they think, feel and make sense of their surroundings and interactions(Nason, 2020). This is part of what is called the social model of autism, an approach strongly advocated by autistic people that recognises the diversity of brains to the point where there is no 'normal' brain (Armstrong, 2015). It is a strengths-based approach to the reality of neurodiversity and redefines disabilities as impairments and the disabling conditions are the result of barriers created by an

environment designed for the majority (Langtree, 2024). For this research the medical model diagnosis is used only for the consistency of the autism diagnosis of the cohort who were interviewed.

3.3 The School Context

As much as the students interviewed for this research are relatively unique, the educational environment they experienced for high school also has some unique characteristics. The school is "known nationally for its very high academic standards and specialist programs IGNITE for students with high intellectual potential."(Johnson, 2024).

3.4 School Culture

Under the leadership of the principal, the school has become value focused, continuously on a path of progressing their holistic education priority, shifting the focus to the development of the 'whole person.' This involved a cultural shift around valuing all parts that make a student, not just academic outcomes. Special emphasis has been given to creating a mentoring culture, where all teachers play the role of a 'mentor', and behaviour management issues are seen as coaching opportunities, reflecting back to the school values of harmony and respect. Under the guidance of a deputy principal, teachers have been introduced to tools for nurturing relationships, such as micro moments, "lots of little, tiny incidental conversations that show respect"(Rabba et al., 2022, p. 27). The school's 'Learner Journey' has promoted partnerships of teacher, student and parents supporting students in taking responsibility for their learning.

3.5 The POD

The POD, named by students, is a flexible, dynamic learning space and learner support model, which provides students with academic, social/emotional and positive behavioural support, in a dedicated space or in normal classrooms. When the research cohort started high school, it was in the early stages of evolving from a behaviour management service to a centre for triaging and responding to student support requirements, behaviour management issues and work completion. When I joined the POD, the centre had a leader, one Inclusive Education teacher and three school support officers (SSOs). Over the past five years this has expanded to 3 Inclusive Education teachers, 8 SSOs, specialist POD line teachers, and tutors, providing significantly increased support for students with special requirements as well as pedagogical and behaviour management advice to Learning Area Leaders and Mentor and subject teachers. New proactive programs were also established under the heading Elevate, providing mentoring opportunities through community activities and wilderness challenges for students receiving support from the POD.

The research cohort would have had 3 lessons per week in the POD for social skill development and learning support as needed and sometimes a quiet space for doing tests.

3.6   Researcher role

As a new Inclusive Education teacher, with the support of the principal, I was instrumental in introducing a new approach to assisting autistic students that focused on developing individualised strategies to achieve an enabling classroom experience. This involved assessing classroom dynamics, including teaching and behaviour management style, student seating and grouping, general nature of the class and any specific behavioural and social issues, and observing the autistic student's interactions. Strategies were then developed in conjunction with the subject teacher that were specific to that teacher, the nature of the subject and the particular class. This process was aimed at upskilling teachers and developing management strategies and pedagogies that are developmental for autistic students and reduce exclusionary practices.

The research cohort were the initial stimulus for these changes and over their five years of high school I was also able to foster two lunch time clubs 'I'm Different, I am Me' and 'Our World' for neurodivergent students, run a student Q & A on autism, hold a *Neurodivergence Expo* showcasing autistic student passion interests, and oversee an autistic student production of a video 'If the school was built for me,' highlighting the struggles experienced by autistic students living in a neurotypical world.

I am well known to all of the research cohort and have developed a rapport with them that has enabled me to hear and understand much of how they are experiencing high school in informal conversations and interactions. My focus was on being a non-judgemental listener and translator/interpreter between neurotypical and neurodivergent persons to facilitate communication and understanding for the benefit of both.

3.7   Summary

This chapter covered the terminology of autism and the choice to adopt a social model of autism rather than the deficit based traditional medical model. The school culture and context was discussed as background to the understanding of the environment the research cohort experienced. School culture, professional development and provision of targeted supports were described as examples of the school's commitment to inclusion of autistic students. My role as instigator of change and provider of supports and opportunities for recognition of the abilities and challenges of autistic students was also outlined. The next chapter provides details of the research design.

4   Chapter 4: Research Design

4.1   Introduction

This research was designed to elucidate whether the autistic students involved felt safe, accepted and understood in a school attempting to provide an inclusive and equitable secondary education. An analysis of their experiences is important as information to guide future educational organisation and pedagogies. This chapter sets out the background to my involvement as the researcher, the importance of understanding what influences may affect the student's narrative, the research methodology and how the information from interviews was handled, the characteristics of the participants, ethical requirements and considerations, and any limitations of the research.

4.2   Background – How did I get here?

At the time of conducting this research I was engaged as an Inclusive Education teacher, and I also undertook an additional role of Neurodivergence Advisor as part of the school's focus on autism and ADHD. Previous relevant teaching experience included primary school teacher of the deaf and then Head Teacher of a secondary speech and hearing centre for deaf and hard of hearing students, proprietor of a chain of private clinics for children with developmental delays and learning disorders, and first principal of a special project centre for primary school children with significant disruptive behaviours. After decades of senior positions with developmental responsibilities in government, non-government agencies and private enterprise covering youth unemployment, drug and alcohol treatment and rehabilitation, family and crisis counselling services, and aged care services, I returned to teaching full time with autistic students. Six years on I wanted to know what was working and what needed to change from the perspective of the students who are the focus of attention and recipients of what adults believe is right for them.

4.3   Voiced Research

Learning from the retelling of lived experiences is not just about providing the opportunity to hear from the students, it also requires an understanding of the conditions that might influence both what is said and how it is received. The point of this voiced research is to enable autistic students,

> to participate in and influence the educational decisions that shape students' lives and the lives of their peers(Holquist, 2023, p. 2).

In listening to the voices of members of a sub-group, it is important to recognise that minority groups tend to form their own way of understanding and communicating and develop unique "vernacular theories"(McLaughlin, 1996, p. 6). This vernacular, or localised way of speaking, is often not understood, or is devalued as not worthy of serious consideration alongside of more mainstream communication(Foucault, 1980).

This is particularly pertinent in the case of autistic students as the reality described earlier as the "double empathy paradox," (Milton et al., 2022, p. 1901)where cross communication between neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals often leads to significant miscommunication as a result of both neurotypicals and autistics not understanding each other's implicit meaning. This mismatch, which could be called *discourse dissonance,* may cause the autistic person to withdraw, feeling that they are not valued, and they may cease to promote their unique perspective, (Botha & Frost, 2020).

The success of the investigation of lived experience therefore lies in an approach that allows the individual to tell their story, their way, in their words. For this to happen there needs to be a significant degree of trust in the interviewer, and questions that are not only open ended, but allow the interviewee to define the key issues in ways that have meaning to them, not ways determined by the questioner(Smyth, 2001).

> The notion that what is worthwhile investigating may reside with the research subject, and may only be revealed when a situation of trust and rapport is established(Smyth, 2001, p. 407).

It is important also to be aware of the possibility of an interviewee taking some unwarranted responsibility for how they have been treated

> and thus engaging in self-silencing, rather than overtly criticising schooling and school processes (Smyth, 2001, p. 410).

The process of hearing and valuing the unfettered voices of students despite the usual adult and institutional perspectives, and the sometimes-contradictory positions of the students themselves

> means challenging the view that institutions are allowed to remain 'deaf' to adolescent struggles, while legitimating students as the problem [because of their differences] (Smyth, 2001, p. 412)

As the researcher, my role then is to listen, reflect, re-calibrate and validate with the interviewee until they are confident that I understand the experience they are sharing and trust that I will be able to reliably convey their perspective to a neurotypical audience.

4.4 Methodology

The methodology for this research project is a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of the cohort in question, on the premise that there are core common elements of those experiences (Patton, 1990) that can influence and inform future pedagogical practices and organisational processes. Phenomenological research differs from basic qualitative research in that it is looking at the meaning that individuals place on the experiences they have(Patton, 2002). The common experience of a group of autistic students in one high school for five years was examined in order to reach a point where it was possible to say, "now I understand what it is like to have experienced that particular phenomenon" (Worthington, 2013, p. 1) . We may never entirely understand if we are neurotypical with different life experiences but the intention and the focus to listen, reflect and recalibrate will bring us to a better understanding while establishing a respectful relationship with our autistic students.

A phenomenological approach goes beyond considering processes to explore explicit common essences of experience, and "is well suited for studying affective, emotional and often intense human experiences"(Merriam, 2009, p. 26). In this research the phenomena being explored were the sense of safety, the feeling of being accepted, and the sense of being understood. The experiences that had led to the individual student's sense of each of these phenomena was elicited through guided interviews. These interviews were more open dialogue than questions and answers as I was wanting to ensure that their feelings emerged and the discourse went in whatever direction the student chose, arriving at a conclusion that is uniquely theirs(Gadamer, 1975).

The questions were designed and delivered in such a way as to allow for personal interpretation and definition of the terminology and even the freedom to reject the premise of a question. The basic objective was to create a situation where each interviewee was encouraged to say how they felt about their lived experience of high school because "inclusion is a feeling (a sense of belonging), not a place (mainstream or otherwise)"(Goodall, 2020, p. 1285). The objective was to achieve a greater understanding of how to structure high school experiences for neurodivergent students.

4.5 Method

The information gathered was grouped, categorised and analysed "on the assumption that *there is an essence or essences to shared experience*"(Patton, 1990, p. 70 emphasis in original). A Hermeneutic Circling approach was then employed as a contemplative process for me as the listener that allowed for meaning to emerge as ideas were clarified and confirmed or adjusted by the student(Van Manen, 1990). The Hermeneutic Circling approach involved each interview being transcribed and returned to

the interviewee for their approval for use. In this process, they were be invited to add any additional information they considered relevant. From the final student approved transcript, crafted stories, descriptions and interpretations were then written, reviewed against the original interview tape, and refined. This process continued until all students had been interviewed and all crafted stories had been interpreted, and the common themes had emerged ready for detailed analysis to be undertaken. See Appendix C for a list of the headings of all the crafted stories, and Appendix D for an example of a crafted story and the description and explanation.

4.6   Research Participants

Invitations to participate in this research were sent to all of the 10 autistic students who completed their final year of high school in 2023. Five students volunteered and were interviewed resulting in a 50% participation rate. The sample size was considered suitable for a qualitative study(Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), especially as the final interviews indicated that a saturation point had been reached where no new themes were emerging(Crabtree, 2006).

The cohort of 2 female and 3 male students were aged 17 – 18 at the time of interview and have all been formally diagnosed as having an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). They also all qualify as twice exceptional (2eASD). Three of the five students have verified high cognitive abilities and the other two demonstrate "characteristics at home and school that are significantly above the average for their age"(The Australian Curriculum (Version 9.0), 2024 accessed 2/05/2024), a standard set by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) as indicative of giftedness. This is a relatively unique subset of autism and was an incidental and unexpected outcome of the voluntary involvement in the research process. This lesser-known aspect of the autism spectrum warrants some further examination as these students would have presented challenges and requirements that were outside of the experiences and awareness of most teachers(Callahan, 2017), especially in Australia (Ronskley-Pavia et al., 2019).

The combination of academic giftedness and autism is often not recognised as the two conditions tend to obscure each other. Autism often involves heavy masking as individuals seek to "blend in" and this would make it harder for the giftedness to be identified(Sedgewick et al., 2021, p. 16). There is also a gap that may occur between intellectual capacity and academic performance due to characteristics of autism(Foley-Nicpon, 2018). Without a proper diagnosis or understanding of the condition, neither aspect of exceptionality may be appropriately responded to, resulting in the student not accessing the services, supports and pedagogies that are relevant for their unique requirements (Hall C, 2023; Ronksley-Pavia, 2019). These students have progressed through their high school experience without

being formally identified as twice exceptional because this diagnosis is not yet on the DMS-V diagnostic schedule, and therefore would have had little or no interaction with staff who had expertise in addressing the added complexities. This cohort are likely to be viewing their high school experience through a lens of not fully knowing themselves and not being seen in their full capacity by their teachers.

4.7 Ethics Statement.

Ethics approval was granted for this research project by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of Flinders University on 21st December 2023. This research study was undertaken within the guidelines established in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2018. These guidelines are designed to ensure that research participants are engaged in research that has merit and integrity, the participants are treated with respect and understanding of their values and vulnerability, and they are able to make informed consent to their involvement.

4.8 Ethics, privacy, and confidentiality.

All autistic students who completed Yr 12 at one schoolin 2023 were invited by email to participate in a semi-structured interview of their lived experience of high school. HREC - Information Sheet and Consent Form Template (Dec 2023) (see Appendix E) was used for this purpose. All of these students had known me for some years as an advocate for them, a non-judgemental listener, a negotiator of organisational changes for their benefit, a mentor where needed, and a continuing supporter of the development of their self-advocacy and agency. Participants opted into the process and could opt out of any aspect of the study as it progressed. They were given regular opportunities to confirm their willingness to continue participation and withdrawal would have been accepted without consequence or coercion.

Respondents were interviewed in a relaxed environment that they agreed to, with open ended questions that they were invited to interpret in their own way. No time limit was applied or implied and the interviews were free to flow or cease as determined by the student.

4.9 Limitations

The intention of my research was to open the door to the voices of a cohort of students who have the most recent experience of what might be considered the best the mainstream system can offer, and give them the permission, support and confidence to say what they want to say, without any

expectation of what that might sound like, or influence for them to be normative, or sensitive to the opinions of neurotypical listeners. The direction this might take was unpredictable.

As the interviewer, my responsibility and challenge was to forego any preconceptions, beliefs and adherence to conventional wisdom and be guided, indeed tutored, by the interviewee on how to hear and understand what was real for them based on their lived experience. The quality of the information arising from the interviews would be testament to the degree to which I was able honour this requirement for objectivity and non-judgemental openness. The small number of participants means that the findings are not able to be generalised, but they do provide significant feedback to the school on the effect of interventions and areas of concern that the school may not be fully aware of, as well as providing stimulus for further research.

4.10   Summary

This chapter covered how as the researcher I came to be involved in this investigation, the importance of understanding the unique vernacular of the research cohort, the methodology and methods employed to access their lived experience of high school and the characteristics of the students themselves. Ethical considerations and approvals were documented, and limitations of the research acknowledged. The next chapter details the Findings from the interviews.

5   Chapter 5: Findings

5.1   Introduction

Each of the participants had the opportunity to discuss in their own way their thoughts and feelings with respect to the phenomena of feeling safe, accepted and understood over their five years of secondary schooling. The participant's responses are examined below. The responses were also collectively considered, and three common sub-themes were identified and will be discussed further in the following chapter. The participating students' identities have been protected by the use of the terms P1 to P5 (participants 1-5) and all pronouns used in reference to them are gender neutral.

5.2   Safe at school.

Safety was viewed in several ways by different participants. P1 defined it most clearly in terms of being isolated as an effect of not being accepted.

> If I had a class where it was basically the people that I didn't know and they were going to not be nice to me, discriminate against me, or people that were more popular and they weren't going to let me sit at their table and I was going to a class to sit by myself, it felt awkward and it felt unsafe because it felt like people were out to criticise me. So sometimes it pushed me to show resistance to actually going to those classes.

> My sense of safety felt a lot more vulnerable when I was just sitting by myself compared to sitting in a group. One group was whispering to each other in front of me and ignoring me completely. It felt awkward so I ended up just sitting by myself at the table in the middle.

> Those times were very scary for me because it felt like I was being stared at by all the people in the classroom. I was the odd one out and that made me feel vulnerable.

is revealing that they were conscious of being different and highly sensitive to indications that other students are seeing them as negatively different. Not having an identified and inclusive seating positioning made the classroom an unsafe environment for them.

P2 expressed similar concerns about entering classrooms.

> If it's a new environment for me, not knowing what I'm walking into, that's when I feel unsafe because I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know what to anticipate. Walking into classrooms for the first time and seeing a bunch of loud and crude people, and they like to tease and point out flaws, they make it uncomfortable because you can't really avoid them, you are stuck in an area that is unsafe.

P4 saw safety in terms of being understood and listened to by specific adults. In this case key staff played an important role in creating a safe haven for them.

Feeling safe and understood came down to a matter of trusted adults, which I never had at my primary school. Such as my mentor group teacher. I'm very grateful to have had him. He was someone I could feel relatively comfortable to talk to about any issues or even just questions I had or if I had something I needed to communicate regarding admin or lesson selection or problems. I had a trusted centre point.

P1 expressed a similar feeling about the importance of trusted staff in feeling safe.

If you aren't listened to and aren't heard, you feel quite alone in your learning journey because you have to build everything for yourself. Where there was someone from day one who I knew that would be there no matter what, no matter what happened, a staff member for example, that you can go to with your problems or just get help with things, it makes the education journey a lot smoother, a lot safer. It drastically increases your feeling of safety.

There were also environments that were seen as safe places. P1 identified some of those places and also the importance of trusted adults, while also identifying the reason for needing safe environments.

I like how the school had the POD. That's a really good positive because the POD was a place where you can go and get your work done. And they basically promoted a quiet environment, and they surrounded you with tutors and staff members. You can't really get bullied in the POD because there's tutors around and it's literally come there, get some help with your work and that's what it's supposed to be about. So, it's a safe environment.

Also the clubs, I think there were a lot of people found them as a safe space. I did with the [Our World] neurodivergent club. I really enjoyed attending that one in year 12. And the other clubs, even the hobby-based ones that weren't specifically about being different from others, it was just about their hobbies. Even those ones just helped connect with other people with similar interests, so they weren't surrounded with strangers that would criticise. I don't think there's really much of a space for harassment in classes or in clubs where it was just about [a hobby] because everyone would have a similar goal and shared interests so they can connect over that.

All participants stated bullying as the most significant cause of not feeling safe. However, the behaviour they experienced was not seen as traditional bullying in most cases. P2 defined it this way.

I feel like the bullying that happened in high school was bullying in a way that wouldn't be bullying if you described it. The bullying happens from someone you already know well, and it happens in a way that's like they say something to you or behave in a way in which you understand that this person is being mean. This person is purposely doing these things to make me feel uncomfortable. For example, my friend stopped waving hi to me in the hallways and now always pulls faces whenever they turn away from me. Technically, that's not bullying. They get better at disguising it as [they] get older.

P1 had a similar experience and view.

There are subtle things that can't be just outright taken to a teacher. People giving you small body language signs or walking away or something like that. It's not something that you could bring to a teacher.

I believe I was being targeted because I was different.

> I think the school's fairly aware of it, but not to the point where they experience the feelings we feel. They just think bullying happens occasionally by the wrong people and that's all they get. They don't get patterns.

P5 also talked of intentional actions designed to hurt and make them feel bad about themselves.

> And there was a time where I tried to be in a friend group that really wasn't my kind of friend group. And they did this silly game where they would run away from me in the schoolyard. I felt really alienated because I felt like everyone was treating me some way that I couldn't understand why that was.

P3 dealt with their anxiety about being bullied by being determined to hide their differences as much as possible to avoid being targeted.

> At the beginning of [high school] I [had] in my mind to just not really stand out. So, it's definitely pretty much marking yourself if you say that you have autism. If you're different from someone else, then you stand out and you could be made a target for being different.

Two of the participants referred to the noise levels in classrooms as a factor in feeling safe and three of the participants regularly wore noise cancelling headphones to help deal with the intensity of classroom noise.

In discussing safety, bullying emerges as an expected issue given the considerable research on the subject, but the students also highlighted the importance of organisational factors that reduce uncertainty, having trusted adults, and being among people with similar interests. These will be discussed further in the Findings Chapter.

5.3 Feeling Accepted

Despite the concerns by all of the cohort about being negatively treated by some peers because they were different, they had a generally good feeling about being accepted. P2 differentiated the two phenomena quite succinctly.

> There's a big difference between feeling different and feeling accepted. You don't have to be like everyone else to feel accepted, you're allowed to feel different and separate from the group. I feel like this school did a really good job of me being different and weird without that being a bad thing".

P1 was positively inclined from the beginning, especially in contrast to their experiences in primary school.

> I found it quite exciting at the beginning because I thought this is a new opportunity to be accepted by new people and to reinvent myself. I feel like I was accepted more at high school than previously at my primary school, especially by the teachers.

P3 was even more positive in their assessment.

> In terms of the school's culture of acceptance, I'd say 8 out of 10. It is a pretty accepting, pretty tolerant school when it comes to neurodivergent people.

> Among peers there was tolerance of difference, just passing differences off as weird. I don't know how accepting peers were, but you weren't harassed for it. It's kind of you're here and they'll put up with it, but they wouldn't be friends with you.

> Some teachers were more understanding of student's needs. A neurodivergent student might ask something that's not as useful to everyone else. The teacher would just indulge us and answer the question, even though it's not really that relevant to the course.

In keeping with P3's determination to not stand out, they are able to observe that their peers are generally tolerant of differences, but up to a point. They might not want to be friends with students who are different and not be accepting of someone considered to be too different. P3 is consciously calibrating their actions to ensure that they do not go outside of what they believe will be acceptable. It is likely however that they were experiencing tolerance rather than acceptance in many situations.

Not all the cohort thought that there was general acceptance. P4 was aware that the school was trying to address some issues that were relevant to them but was not always convinced that the actions being taken were indicative of acceptance of who they were.

> There were a lot of trial programmes that were trying to make a difference, and they realised there was something that they needed to work on, but they weren't quite sure how to do it and there was varying degrees of success. Even though it was the best of intentions, some of the things can feel quite patronising. The fact that the school is trying must be some form of acceptance.

This is a situation where attempts at showing acceptance are not entirely successful due to not understanding the student or the way assistance was experienced and P4 did not feel wholly accepted even when being supported.

> There was a degree to which I was on the edge of everything. I felt a bit more tolerated than accepted. People were tolerant. People were polite, they were nice, but I never really identified as one of them. If the class would be sent off to do something, I would be called over to talk to someone or if everyone would go to this place, but then I would go to this other place because it was a better place for me to handle sensory overload. It led to the feeling that by default I wasn't included in everyone. If the teacher would say OK everyone do this, I would subconsciously assume they're not talking about me. So, in a way that sort of escalated the issue of me not feeling part of everyone else.

> Just engaging with all the things that [are] supposed to help, made me feel I was different as well. I don't think particularly negative. But I was very lucky being at a school which is to my understanding a relatively tolerant place without large bullying or anything. So, I was quite comfortable not hiding the fact that I was different.

However, P4 also had opportunities to participate in student forums with very favourable outcomes.

> I had the opportunity to represent the different autistic groups and to represent the POD and talk about how they're used for an assortment of students who need special support at school. I went

to student Congress, and I made suggestions, and I got called in for the big student Congress and it was me talking about my experiences as an autistic person. I did feel quite accepted especially in the later years, and I had quite good relations with the teachers, I felt like I was quite accepted by them.

While initial responses to the question of feeling accepted were generally positive, further thought and discussion revealed a sense of being tolerated rather than accepted in many circumstances.

5.4   Being Understood

Being understood was a harder question to answer in definitive terms. P5 was the most certain about this issue.

> Well, my time at high school definitely wasn't easy. And I feel like if I had insights earlier on into the things that can help me, that would have made things a lot better. And also the education environment itself is so outdated and its functions and the way things are tested. Having tests and exams, that's always been something that's been difficult for me because I feel like I can't portray my knowledge fully in those sorts of assessments. And so that's like a big struggle for me.

> 8 hours a day five days a week at school was exhausting. I always felt tired after a school day. During the time where I could be doing homework and schoolwork, I was too tired and burnt out and I couldn't do it.

P5 began high school without a diagnosis and as a result was not initially aware of their need for special supports. They express a clear idea of what works best for them in enabling them to demonstrate their learning and understanding of subjects. Despite being very able academically, P5 did not feel understood and assisted to learn in a way that worked best for them.

P3 also considered that they had not been supported in accordance with their diagnosis.

> For the first year or two of high school I wasn't aware of special provisions, and it was a shock to hear that there was a privilege like that out there. But it's also an indicator of the school not really understanding where problems might be happening. The school did know I was neurodivergent, and I may need some support, but I guess I was just ignored for those middle years.

This is an example of the dilemma with twice exceptional students, autistic and gifted, as they are most often not seen as needing assistance because of the intellectual ability to cope with most school tasks effectively hides many characteristics of their autism. It is only when demands increase and executive functioning has not sufficiently developed that the need for extra support becomes more obvious.

P2 however, had an entirely different perspective. They not only stated that it was safe to be their 'weird' self at times but that the school took very obvious steps to understand them.

> This school has been a lot different when it comes to how they approach someone who is not like most people. They took more time to think, who are you and how are we going to challenge you

to be a better you, not how are we going to challenge you to be someone who we think everyone must become.

P4 was also quite positive about how the school worked for them and the ways in which understanding developed.

> At high school there was the presence of hope in a way. There was room for negotiation and for reason and therefore I pursued negotiation and reason if there was an issue. The school tried a lot of things with varying degrees of success. I was a welcome guinea pig because it was to make sure that everyone there could go well. They offered a bit of a default package, which usually worked well enough, but there was quite a bit of room for just talking to them about how I could best learn.

P1 considered that the majority of the teachers were at the

> 60th or 70th percentile, trying a little bit to understand and accept but they're not going overboard, but they're not completely uncaring either. I'd say most teachers put in effort but haven't got there fully.

But being understood by teachers did not necessarily result in being understood by peers. P4 recounts an incident that essentially unintentionally denied or denigrated his autistic identity.

> I felt like I was treated sort of all right by my peers, just like always on the edge. I would note one thing that unlike a lot of other words which have fallen out of favour recently, words such as autistic and retarded are still widely used as insults. I was in a class for gifted students and at one point I casually mentioned in conversation that I was autistic to one of my classmates and even with it sort of meant as a compliment and a joke, it came out as "you're too smart to be autistic." That wasn't the only time I heard that either. So the words like autistic were used as insults. The fact that people used them as insults generally, made me less comfortable.

This confusion or misunderstanding is common where there is co-existence of autism and exceptional intellectual ability, but it is also an indicator that their peers had a deficit-based view of autism. This is a situation of not understanding autism, and holding a 'lesser than' perception of autism.

P5 was diagnosed as autistic mid-way through Yr. 10 and as a result was able to re-frame who they were and what they were experiencing.

> My diagnosis made things academically a lot easier. In Yr. 10, I had really bad burnouts and that continued throughout the school year. But being able to have that support and understanding was really helpful.

> After the diagnosis, I feel the support was much more so on the teachers' side, not so much in student social life, because in my generation being autisticis used as an insult. And so, there's always that stigma.

> Another thing I've found really difficult was the use of ableist words. I had an art teacher who was completely not understanding at all when she made assumptions that it was just me being uninterested in the course and just really not engaged when that was not at all the case.

P5 is describing common experiences where bright autistic students are seen as being lazy, oppositional or not motivated when they are struggling to understand a task, organise themselves or have the energy to initiate a task and meet deadlines(Ronksley-Pavia, 2019). It is more likely to not be 'I won't' but a not recognised or understood case of 'I can't'.

5.5   Summary

This chapter explored the participants' lived experiences over their five years of high school. The findings reveal that in many ways school was not experienced as a safe place, with bullying, classroom management, and sensory overload creating significant challenges and distress, although there are some safe havens within the school. While their attendance at a mainstream school would indicate acceptance at some level, there are experiences that suggest tolerance is more likely the case, especially with respect to peers. Understanding is not universal and is limited in many aspects, but there are good indications that there are key staff who are beginning to appreciate what an autistic student may be experiencing and what they might require for support. There is an encouraging view that the school is trying to address issues but not sure what to do.

Some specific sub-themes emerged from the students' responses to their experience of safety, acceptance and understanding and these are discussed in the next chapter.

6   Chapter 6: Themes

We are different, that's a fact, but they treat us like we're different-er (Mesa, 2022)

6.1   Introduction

Three themes emerged from the interviews. These were ***primary school trauma, being seen as weird,*** and ***with the best of intentions***. These themes were chosen as they appeared in at least 3 of the student interviews and they are elaborated below.

6.2   Primary school trauma

All the participants spoke of primary school as a very negative experience to the point of being traumatising for some. For each of the five participants it was a different primary school but a common experience. The mention of primary school was quite disturbing for P2.

> With my primary school, my brain has recognized the surrounding streets and even if I go down a surrounding street, my brain will recognise it as we're going back to school. And immediately I start feeling anxious and scared and depressed, and I actually start getting grumpy and verbally violent with whoever's in the car.
>
> I was triggered, I wasn't safe.
>
> My primary school held everyone to the same standard, same expectations, this is how you behave, this is what to do, what not to do. And if you weren't into this cookie cutter shape, then you weren't one of us.

P2 's reflection on their primary school experience suggests a situation that was not only non-inclusive but was ableist in its approach. The pressure to be like everyone else not only denies the reality of the autistic student but defines their differences as defects that must be corrected(Sue Mesa, 2021).

P2 speaks to the long-term traumatising effect of this approach. It can be assumed that there would have been some teachers who were compassionate, supportive, and understanding, albeit without the necessary knowledge and pedagogical expertise to provide the environment and support that may have been required, but the overall unsupportive culture of the school is what has prevailed in their mind. This is more than being non-inclusive, the effect on the participant is to feel unwanted, and unacceptable, a challenge to their psychological existence(Hebron, 2014).

For P4, primary school was a time where they felt very much left to work things out on their own.

> There wasn't really anything to support me at my primary school, so I didn't know there was anything that could be done differently for different people to see how they could best learn. I

didn't really like primary school. There were things I would call bullying and there were times I would bully other people as well. I didn't end up with a good reputation because I would fight to protect myself because no one would listen to me.

For P5 primary school was a time where they did not understand themselves and there was no help for that, and no protection from bullying due to their differences.

When it came to the social life because I had things about myself that I couldn't explain and people noticed it and they didn't know what it was either, but they were off putted by it. I was bullied pretty much from year four to year seven. So that was really difficult.

This experience was somewhat similar for P3.

Primary school didn't really focus on preventing or supporting my needs and stopping me getting harassed by others since I did bring it up with the school, but there wasn't much action being taken. I didn't understand why exactly I was disliked by some of my peers.

Experiences in primary school years of not being understood or protected would make the transition process to high school quite critical as an important opportunity to create a belief that high school could be different, and more affirming and accepting. The process of inclusion of autistic students in high school needs to start in the last year of primary school. Giving the students opportunities to connect with the high school over a number of personalised visits would begin to address the negative experiences of primary school and build the potential for a positive high school experience.

6.3 Being seen as weird

The word weird appeared significantly in three of the participants' interviews as a negative description of their behaviour that they had accepted as applicable to them. P3 explained the differences defined as weird and the consequences that could follow.

I think that when I was in primary school, I was weird, and I might have been warned that harassment might have been warranted a little because I was different. I was facing some conflict, but we need to say weird, maybe I'd use some strange vocabulary, like most sophisticated vocabulary or I have some out of the box thinking ideas, I might come up with stranger ideas than others, the way I talk, the tone of my voice might just sound off to others. And the end of the day, if you're different from someone else, then you stand out and you could be made a target for being different.

P1 explained the social cost of being weird.

I believe I was being targeted because I was different. And my peers felt the pressure to not look different as well by being friends with me. If you were hanging out with a person people consider weird, then you'd also be considered weird.

P3 expanded on their experience of 'weird' in the context of their endeavours to not stand out in order to reduce the risk of peer aggression.

> If there's another neurodivergent kid in my class and he says something out of the ordinary, we might just think that he's pretty weird and that's OK and we just let it slide. But we might still think that he's weird.

> So there's a range between that's different, that's an OK opinion, or that's relatively normal. But after you get past that, it's pretty weird, it's too different.

Not all participants had negative experiences relating to being seen as weird. P2 was able to adopt the term in their own way with some very positive outcomes.

> I feel like this school did a really good job of me being different and people being like, yeah, [they're] weird without that being a bad thing. And even introducing me to other people, they'd be like they are a weirdo. But we love them.

P3 was focused on not standing out to avoid the consequences of being seen as different and was largely successful in that masking, but they used the word 'weird' 16 times in a 30 minute interview, suggesting that it was a very real and undesirable concern.

6.4   With the best of intentions

Three of the participants raised concerns about the unintended consequences they experienced as a result of receiving special supports and participating in programs designed for their benefit. P4 saw it as confirming their differences.

> There was a degree to which I felt different because I was going to special groups, or I was talking much more often to teachers, or I had special allowances. Although they're designed to help, they do in a way make me feel different. Just engaging with all the things that are supposed to help, made me feel I was different as well.

P3 was particularly concerned about the negative consequences they wanted to avoid, and it may have resulted in them not availing themselves of support that could have helped.

> There are the special supports and adjustments that are available to me, but I would try to utilise the supports in a secretive manner or private manner. I wouldn't tell everyone in the class that I have special provisions since I fear that I might stand out due to it, and negatively. But I think it's definitely really useful. I'm just not going to let my friends know I have it, since they might perceive me differently after that. I have lied to them about whether or not I have special provisions and they might have noticed and might know that I was lying.

The school's efforts to meet the requirements of autistic students also concerned P4, even though they appreciated the intention.

> There were a lot of trial programmes, and it sort of gave me the impression that there were a lot of people involved in my education and everyone else's education that were trying to make a difference and they realised there was something that they needed to work on, but they weren't quite sure how to do it and obviously that meant it was varying degrees of success. But it feels like

getting dragged between this theory and that theory and it changes all the time, even though it was the best of intentions, some of the things can feel quite patronising.

My own efforts to maintain a regular and relatively informal connection with key students created some awkwardness for P1. I am the case manager referred to in P1's comments.

> My case manager sometimes walked in to classes to see me and I felt a bit uneasy, nervous, because I didn't like being singled out in that way. And then people would wonder, oh, what did you talk to your case manager about? What did they want this time? Or they'd say, what did you do this time, like I've done something wrong.

> I think there was a lot of value that the case manager added through that process, but it was a bit singling out. You don't want to feel like everyone's looking at you differently because you get a different treatment from the teachers.

Even classes that were held in a different area away from the normal classrooms raised difficulties for P1. They valued the benefits of 3 lessons a week in the POD but still had to confront a stigma related to the experience.

> Students used to ask me why I have a POD line, even though there were 'normal' people with one. And it would be annoying to just say because I found it better and I would fumble to explain it and people would almost use that POD line as a criticism.

The act of acknowledging the autistic students' differences and providing support and interventions for them has helped them while working against their inclusion by drawing attention to their differences in a peer environment that does not value neurodiversity.

6.5   Summary

Three sub-themes arising from the participants' reflection on their experiences were presented; primary school bullying, being seen as weird, and well-intentioned interventions that unintentionally further stigmatised them. The aggression towards these autistic students based on a negative view of their differences was very significant in primary school and has continued into high school but in a more subtle form. It is not surprising that they have accepted a view that they are 'not normal' and are aware of being treated as lesser beings. This would perpetuate a heightened sensitivity to how they are perceived by others and some of the current methods of providing adjustments and support have added to their sense of being different. These issues will be discussed in the next chapter.

7   Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1   Introduction

This study sought to understand the lived experience of five autistic students through exploring reflections on their five years at a mainstream high school. They responded to open ended questions about whether they felt safe, accepted, and understood as the basis for feeling included during their five years of secondary education.

When I first proposed the idea that for successful inclusion to be achieved for autistic students, they would need to feel safe, accepted and understood, I had in mind that this was a linear process. They would need to have some sense of safety to come to school and attend classes, and as they felt some security at this level, they would begin to feel accepted. Acceptance into the school community would enable the development of understanding of their uniqueness which would enhance opportunities for appropriate supports and adjustments facilitating engagement and competence. As the interviews unfolded it became apparent that this is a circular or spiralling process. Feeling safe requires a level of acceptance, but real acceptance is dependent on the growth of understanding in order be aware of the conditions necessary for safety, and full acceptance is dependent on an understanding of the universality and value of diversity. The interplay of the phenomena will be explored in this chapter.

7.2   Feeling Safe and Peer Aggression

All students want to experience school as a safe environment free from stigma and aggression(Cleary, 2024; Nason, 2020; Wood, 2021). The research cohort commenced their high school experience after years of self-reported bullying and stigmatisation in primary school. Despite that history the participants conveyed a determination and hope that high school was an opportunity to be seen in a different way, and to have a more positive experience. One of the participants talked of being in the "presence of hope" and another decided "I've got a chance to change and get new opportunities that I wouldn't have before", while a third student declared, "at the beginning I [had] in my mind to just not really stand out". The legacy of the primary school experiences was that they all had a view that there was something that they had to change about themselves to have a safer experience at high school. The research indicates that this might result in social camouflaging to avoid stigma, bullying and discrimination (Huws & Jones, 2015; Mesa, 2022) and may have a significant effect on mental health (Hull et al., 2017).

Over the first few years of secondary school, all of the participants said that they were seen as different by their peers and experienced negative attention that made them feel uncomfortable, excluded, and unsafe. The awareness of being different in a way that is seen as "not normal" (Ronksley-Pavia, 2019)brings with it a hyper awareness of being judged, discriminated against and intentionally treated badly(Hebron, 2014).

In a school culture that focused on harmony and upheld zero tolerance of bullying, the targeting of students seen as different did not go away, it became more sophisticated in delivery. The intent was the same as overt bullying of a person seen as different, but the manner was disguised to reduce the risk of detection and consequence. One of the participants described it thus,

> It happens in a way in which you understand that this person is being mean. This person is purposely doing these things to make me feel uncomfortable.

This style of bullying may be more harmful than traditional attacks because it carries with it the added insult that the victim may be seen as imagining a slight that was not intended. Even if the behaviours that are reducing a sense of safety are recognised by some teachers, the subtleness of the actions provide alleged offenders with plausible deniability, and even a case for arguing victimhood, if there is an attempt to hold the perpetrators to account.

The perception of experiences by the research participants, as feeling that they are the targets of covert acts meant to create harm or discomfort, fits the research discussed earlier (Skrzypiec et al., 2018) arguing that the definition of bullying does not adequately address aggressive behaviour experienced by many students. The use of the term peer aggression is recommended as it encompasses the wider range of intentionally harmful behaviours experienced by autistic students (Skrzypiec et all, 2018 (p. 102). The degree of harm reported by the victim should then be the determiner of the seriousness of the actions and the focus of supportive responses (p. 115). The experiences of being the target of intentional harm reported by this research cohort is not a feature of their school, but a phenomenon related to the stigma associated with autism across communities and countries (Adams, 2020; Maïano, 2016; Ronksley-Pavia, 2019). The reality of the potential for negative targeting from peers also makes the classroom experience problematic. As one student commented,

> not knowing what I'm walking into, that's when I feel unsafe because I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know what to anticipate.

The heightened anxiety experienced by most autistic students makes entering a new classroom particularly stressful. The importance of predictability and routines are not recognised and catered for

in these situations, causing some autistic students to baulk at entering some classes. As another of the participants explained,

> When I was in a class where I knew everyone there and it was a pretty quiet class, I didn't feel pressured to be a certain way around them. I could just sit down and be myself and enjoy the class.

Classroom management is not just an issue for autistic students. The Australian Government initiated a special enquiry into their concern with declining behaviours in classroom compared to other countries(İdil et al., 2024). The Minister for Education in releasing *The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms: Final Report* included the following quote from Dr. J Donavon, lead author of the 'Engaged Classrooms' resources developed by the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) (Minister for Education, 2023)

> Students thrive in classrooms where they are engaged in learning without distractions; where they feel safe; and where they know what is expected of them(Media Release 5 December 2023).

This situation is not what the research participants said they experienced in many classrooms and they generally perceived that there is not a consistency of expectations across the school. One of the research participants addressed this issue.

> Even though students hate it, something that should be done is probably a class seating plan. It only happens on the rare circumstance as a punishment, but I don't think it's much of a bad thing.

Autistic students' hypersensitivity to bright lights and loud noises can also exacerbate the sense of the classroom as a hostile environment. The acceptance of the use of noise cancelling headphones is important, but if that is all that happens to accommodate an autistic student with sensory challenges, then this is what is defined as integration, not inclusion(Graham, 2020).

> A student on the autism spectrum is 'included' in a busy and visually overwhelming mainstream classroom with a pair of noise-cancelling headphones and an aide to deal with the inevitable meltdowns(p. 21).

The cumulative effect of these conditions can lead to dysregulation of an autistic student where they can become the focus of attention for behaviour management, often resulting in temporary withdrawal from the class or even exclusion as a behavioural consequence(Mesa, 2022).

The participants did however define safe havens in the school that met their requirements such as the POD and lunch time involvement in clubs. There was also safety in being able to find their neurodivergent peers in the large school population and their intellectual equals amongst the Ignite program. Difficulties in forming social relationships is one of the challenges that marks autistic students as different and the focus of peer aggression, but it becomes easier to establish like-minded

friendships in a larger school population, affording some protection from being targeted (Hebron, 2014; Mesa, 2022) .

While peer aggression continued as part of the high school experience, the participants said that it was less than what had been experienced at primary school. This is in contrast to the research indicating that bullying of autistic students increases as they age(Hebron, 2014), and was most likely mitigated by the formation of autistic social networks, which tend to create a protective factor (p. 625), and the result of a whole school focus on the value and expectations of harmony.

7.3   Acceptance or Tolerance

In general, the participants felt that they were broadly accepted by the school with specific processes and strategies created with their requirements in mind. There are no indications from any of the participants that they felt not wanted at their school, in contrast to primary school experiences. How they described acceptance by their peers is less clear, as a result of the experiences of peer aggression detailed earlier. The degree to which acceptance is more likely tolerance is a matter that was raised by some of the participants. Tolerance versus acceptance is somewhat akin to integration versus inclusion. In both tolerance and integration, the individual is on the outer, confirmed as different, supposedly equal, but not in reality. This is indicative of integration only, where the autistic student has to do the adjusting rather than a system commitment to design learning opportunities that are suitable for all students(Graham, 2020), including autistic students, to foster a sense of acceptance and belonging.

Some of the research cohort were in the Ignite classes and were accepted on their cognitive exceptionality which outweighed some differences from autism. The over-riding issue of acceptance is directly connected to how the autistic student is viewed by their peers. The fact that the participants said they were conscious of being seen as weird, indicates that they are aware of being negatively viewed by many their peers and less likely to be accepted. As one of the participants put it, "there's a social pressure against people in school to choose who they hang out with", indicating that there was a risk to the reputation of a student if they were friends with someone who is seen as negatively different.

Whether all the teachers were accepting of differences of neurodivergent students or benevolently tolerant is an open question. However, the participants said they recognised and appreciated the presence and support of key staff who became trusted adults because they were truly accepting. The following are comments from four of the research cohort.

The school leadership was quite good at making me feel included and wanted in school. Like a worthwhile member of the school. (P4)

I felt I can continue being different without being an outcast, without being 'not one of us'. (P2)

There's a handful of people who have been very helpful through my time. (P3)

If my case manager wasn't there, I think it would have been a lot more challenging. (P1)

The importance of having a good relationship with a trusted member of staff is considered an essential element for successful inclusion of autistic students in mainstream schools (Brownlow, 2021; Graham, 2020) and the Mentor Teachers and Case Managers were seen as very important to the participants' feelings of being accepted.

7.4   Understood or Misunderstood

The degree to which autistic students feel understood by their teachers appears to be dependent on how much lived experience the teacher has with autistic students. Understanding one autistic student does not generalise to others, but the process of getting to understanding is the critical issue. The participants said they valued actions by staff that helped build trust which would have given them confidence to reveal aspects of what they were experiencing that they needed staff to understand (Graham, 2020; Larcombe et al., 2019).

The themes of 'weirdness' and 'with the best of intentions' tend to coalesce to complicate the ability to understand the specific requirements of individuals. 'Being seen as weird' creates a pressure on the part of the autistic student to act in a way that is less different, masking who they really are, and what they are experiencing (Cage et al., 2018; Hull et al., 2017). The determination to not stand out, in order to reduce the risk of peer aggression—a decision made by most of the participants—was reported as having stopped some from asking for help, making their requirements less obvious. Understanding this might stimulate the implementation of more pro-active interventions, but it is also likely that some of the students would have refused offers of help because of their concern that it would be further stigmatising. This is described as the "dilemma of difference"(Minow, 1985).

1. When does treating people *differently* emphasise their differences and stigmatise or hinder them on that basis?

2. When does treating people *the same* become insensitive to their difference and likely to stigmatise or hinder them on that basis? (p.20)

The assumed necessity or accepted standard practice of adjusting tasks and assessment processes specifically for autistic students and providing some learning opportunities in separate facilities, thus creating the stigmatising potential, is challenged by the proponents of Universal Design for Learning

(UDL) and Differentiated Instruction (DI). These pedagogical models assert that student diversity can be accommodated in the classroom by pedagogical approaches that cater for all differences amongst students (Capp, 2017; Tomlinson, 2014) without the need for any student to feel negatively different.

> The philosophy of UDL is based on the idea that there are multiple ways of representing knowledge (principle one), multiple ways students can demonstrate their understanding (principle two), and multiple ways of engaging students (principle three)(Capp, 2017, p. 792).

DI facilitates greater inclusion as it "reduces barriers to participation and requires that teachers adapt to learner needs"(Porta, 2023, p. 11).

> DI does this by addressing the individual needs of each learner and acknowledging the differences between them, ensuring that teachers understand student readiness, utilise student interests, allow students to engage with content, and adapt to learners' preferences to increase motivation and engagement (Porta, 2023, p. 11)

Both of these approaches are inclusive practices designed to create a classroom environment where all students may feel that they are part of diversity and will have access to a variety of options around how they learn and are assessed. This would address the concern raised by one of the participants who despite being very able academically, did not feel understood and assisted to learn in a way that worked best for them.

> Having tests and exams has been difficult for me because I can't portray my knowledge fully in those sorts of assessments. (P5)

Testing in traditional ways can be disabling for students who may have slower processing speeds or learning difficulties. This student (P5) also experienced extended periods of autistic burnout, a condition that is quite debilitating but not well understood (Arnold et al., 2023; Higgins et al., 2021; Mantzalas, 2024) and which contributed to significant absences at times. Their experience was that absences were the focus of attention and expectation of improvement which would have potentially exacerbated their mental exhaustion. Their view was,

> Poor attendance should be a sign of an issue with the student, but it shouldn't be something that they should be punished for on the basis of just not being in class.

An autistic student may be experiencing any number of barriers to successful attendance. In this instance if the student was very skilled at masking, this would have made it more problematic in understanding how best to respond to absences(Haines et al., 2022). Successful inclusion will require flexibility and creativity to ensure barriers arising from autistic differences are removed or reduced as part of standard classroom structures and pedagogies.

7.5   Summary

This study highlights how the enrolment and attendance of autistic students in mainstream schools may not necessarily guarantee they feel safe, accepted, understood or successfully included. While all of the students reported significant incidences of bullying in primary school, this did not cease in high school but changed in nature to forms of aggression that were not immediately identified as bullying. They experienced continuing negative and aggressive treatment base on their differences and designed to make them feel uncomfortable, 'lesser' and 'othered'. Classroom management also played a part in feeling unsafe in some environments though there were safe places that they valued. Acceptance was not clearly differentiated from tolerance on the part of peers, but some teacher efforts were highlighted as giving a sense of acceptance, as well as the attempts made by the school to provide supports and interventions for their benefits. Being understood was a mixed issue as adjustments and special provisions that responded to some of their requirements were provided in ways that they felt further stigmatised them.

Further consideration of the findings from this research is presented in the final chapter.

8   Chapter 8: Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1   Introduction

This study looked at the experiences of a group of five autistic students over their five years of secondary schooling at one high school. The objective was to investigate their level of inclusion based on reporting of their lived experiences. The focus of interviews and discussion was on the phenomena of feeling safe at school, accepted by the school community, and understood as unique individuals. Common experiences of being subject to peer aggression, being labelled as 'weird', and further unintentionally stigmatised by interventions meant to help, were identified in this process. The experiences and themes have been discussed in the light of current literature on equity and inclusion of autistic students. The study contributes to the research on inclusion in mainstream schools as it gives prominence to the voices of individuals experiencing the culture, organisation and pedagogies of a school that is committed to inclusivity.

8.2   Overview of the research and findings

This study of the lived experiences of a unique cohort of five twice exceptional autistic is an exploration of whether they wereprovided with inclusive and equitable education (UNESCO, 1994) in a way that met their requirements without further stigmatisation(Leifler, 2022). The findings highlight the difficulties that the school and these autistic students faced. While all the participants completed their high school education, from what they said, an overall lack of understanding of autism impacted their sense of safety at school due to their differences being negatively viewed as 'weird' and consequently being vulnerable to peer aggression and leaving them feeling more tolerated than accepted. This may have resulted in academic outcomes that are not consistent with their cognitive capacity(Haines et al., 2022; Hebron, 2014). The following is a summary of the findings on each of the specific research questions.

1. Looking back over the past five years of your schooling at, how Safe did you feel at school?

All the research participants completed their education at their chosen high school as they felt it was a safe enough environment to continue attendance. However, the participants indicated that self-monitoring their behaviour and appearance of difference was a necessary constant awareness that they had to maintain throughout their secondary schooling to reduce incidences of peer aggression focused on their autism. While it could be argued that focusing on fitting in is a relatively normal

behaviour, this is not the same for autistic individuals. The degree of change and suppression of their 'true self' may be far in excess of the adjustment that a neurotypical student might make to fit in with a preferred group, and the physical and emotional effort is high, significantly affecting normal functioning and wellbeing(Costley et al., 2021; Park et al., 2020). Behaviour from some peers that was designed to make them feel lesser than others and meant to cause harm was part of school life and mostly in a way that the students said was not seen by staff or not considered as needing significant action.

Sensory challenges and overload were also factors affecting being able to feel safe and to stay regulated in physical facilities that were not necessarily designed for their inclusion and comfort. Evidence gathered from other autistic students by Roberts and Simpson (2016) led to the conclusion,

> that education professionals require a greater under-standing of the environmental factors that impact on their participation at school (e.g. noise, crowding, limited mobility opportunities, curriculum demands, and changes in routine) as well as understanding the ways in which these factors may exacerbate already heightened levels of stress and anxiety (p. 1089)

None of the twice exceptional students experienced any stigmatisation in relation to their high cognitive abilities. This contrasts with similar research of eight twice exceptional autistic students attending a variety of Australian schools. All of them experienced significant peer aggression based on what the researcher characterised as the "Stigma of Giftedness"(Ronksley-Pavia, 2019). Unlike those students, the participants in this research said that being in a school that valued high academic performance gave them significant peer connections and reduced their risk of being targeted. The large school population also provided enough like-minded students for protective groupings to be achieved through clubs and friendship groups. This is in keeping with findings by Ronksley-Pavia (2019) where being one of only a few twice exceptional students in a school greatly increased the chance of being stigmatised and bullied.

2. Looking back over the past five years of your schooling, how Accepted did you feel at school?
All the participants said that they felt that they were a part of the school community but whether they felt accepted as against just tolerated was a more complicated issue. The difference was more related to how well they felt that they were understood. Most of the cohort said they valued connections with a few key staff whom they felt accepted them and were pro-active in wanting to understand them and their requirements. In relation to the school student population however, most said that being seen as different was not viewed as a positive thing.

The participants said they were very conscious of being seen as 'weird' which would indicate that there was a general student sense that the autistic students were 'not one of them' and therefore

more likely just tolerated rather than accepted. The research cohort said they were able to find acceptance amongst like-minded students and the school's focus on academic excellence, particularly through the Ignite program, proved to be an accepting culture and good peer connections for most of the participants.

3. Looking back over the past five years of your schooling at, how Understood did you feel at school?

Understanding an autistic student requires some understanding of autism. However, an understanding of autism does not automatically provide an understanding of an autistic individual. That requires getting to know the individual in a trusted relationship. The participants said there were some staff who did that well and were valued by them, but this was more the exception than the norm. There were attempts by the school during their final years to provide opportunities for the voices of the autistic students to be heard and two of the cohort said they were involved in these opportunities.

The provisions of support and interventions designed to meet the requirements of the students were appreciated by the students and came from conscious processes of seeking to understand individual requirements, but they expressed their concern that the delivery strategies often further stigmatised them. They saw this as an example of them not being fully understood. The actions and strategies were relevant and well-intended but happened in a way that accentuated their difference to the general school population.

8.3   Summary of Research Findings

The purpose of this research was to hear the voices of autistic students as they reflect on their experience of secondary schooling. The lived experiences of five students has been examined to understand whether they felt included as equals in their school. Their voices, their stories are needed to assist administrators and educators to improve the understanding of autism and the actions and changes necessary to fulfil the human rights of all students to an education that is inclusive and equitable.

In proposing this phenomenological research, I defined three phenomena as essential for successful inclusion in a mainstream school: feeling safe, feeling accepted, and feeling understood. I visualised these phenomena as semi-independently developing in a linear manner, safety enhancing acceptance, and acceptance leading to greater understanding. However, the lived experiences of the students as they expressed it suggested that the phenomenon under investigation was the feeling of inclusion. Safety, acceptance and understanding were inextricably inter-related aspects of inclusion for them.

For some of the students, school did not always feel safe, but there was a sense of acceptance, but without an understanding of what may be required to improve safety, acceptance was expressed by some as more a feeling of tolerance. Each of the three phenomena investigated was qualified in the students' comments by the other two phenomena. Safety from peer aggression may not be achieved without acceptance of their right to be different, not to have to mask to blend in, and an understanding of how differences needed to be catered for. Acceptance required an understanding of the nature of their differences and the need for safe environments. Understanding required students to feel safe and accepted enough to develop the trust needed for their true selves to be revealed.

The themes of *primary school trauma, being seen as weird,* and *with the best of intentions*, reinforced the interconnection of the phenomena as essential parts of inclusion. The research students arrived at high school self-identified as weird, not 'normal', with a long history of bullying for being different. Efforts to support them and address some of their requirements were appreciated but delivered in ways that were stigmatising and perpetuated their feelings of being outsiders. The students in this research are saying that there is not the necessary understanding of their differences and requirements for them to feel fully valued and accepted members of the school community, nor is there the understanding required to be able to ensure a safe environment for them. This is not a failure of commitment to inclusivity of an individual, a team, a school, or a system, rather it is a reflection of an insufficient level of understanding of the neurological reality of autism and the "practices that effectively support these students in inclusive education settings"(Roberts & Webster, 2022, p. 701). Teachers have reported feeling "ill equipped, stressed and anxious about meeting the needs of [autistic students] in their classrooms" (p. 702).

The following chart, Table 1, **A Path to Inclusion** is presented as an illustration of what the participants experienced and where they felt they were on the school journey to inclusion, not entirely safe, more tolerated than accepted, and not understood enough for real safety and acceptance to be achieved.

Table 1 A Path to Inclusion.

Not Safe	Safer	Safe
Overt bullying.	Speedy consequences for bullying.	Broad definition of bullying. (peer aggression). Response to perceived level of harm Coaching of perpetrators on the value of all people.
Covert peer aggression.	Some awareness of peer aggression, coaching and consequences for perpetrators.	Clear school policy on the non-acceptance of peer aggression and regular peer education. Focus on recipient's measure of harm experienced and support and counselling.
Few protective options.	Peer grouping opportunities, engagement in common interest clubs.	Culture of understanding, acceptance and inclusion of neurodiversity. Consistent staff modelling on inclusivity and valuing of neurodiversity.
Environment too bright, too loud. Lack of certainty Many unpredictable changes. No safe, quiet places.	Some certainty of place in classrooms. Noise cancelling headphones, movement passes. Some opportunities for quiet spaces.	Classroom management that defines accepted behaviour, has clear organisational expectations and conscious monitoring and management of noise and movement. Opportunities and places for quiet self-regulation without stigmatisation. Reduction of uncertainty through routines and proactive planning.
Not Accepted	**Tolerated**	**Acceptance**
Considered weird.	Some allowances for differences.	School culture of acceptance and valuing of neurodiversity.
Defined by disability.	Support and interventions based on disabilities.	Strength based learning opportunities for all students. Adjustment of environment and practices to remove disabling barriers.
Treated as negatively different. Seen as 'lesser'. Stigmatised. 'Othered'. Excluded. Ostracised.	Ableist supports aimed at helping to fit in. Separated arrangements, management left to LSOs.	Promotion and celebration of the contributions of neurodivergent peers and role models. Identification of neurodivergence amongst staff for leadership, peer mentoring and role modelling.
Pressure to fit in.	Some allowances and adaptations.	Inclusion of autistic voices in decision making at all levels. All lessons consistent with the UDL principles and strategies.
Not Understood	**Misunderstood**	**Understood**
Ableism.	Deficit based supports and interventions. Coaching to fit in.	Strength based DI and UDL pedagogies and strategies. Ongoing peer and staff education on strategies to ensure inclusivity of neurodiversity.
Exclusion.	Modified behaviour consequences without understanding stress causes.	Autism aware collaborative handling of behaviour challenges.
Autistic burnout.	Pressure to meet deadlines, attendance.	Analysis of stress triggers and strategies to reduce demands, uncertainty, and sensory overload.
School refusal.	Limited tolerance of low attendance. Some time limited flexibility on learning program.	Flexible attendance and learning programs. Low demand environments.

While Table 1 could serve as a useful rubric for schools seeking to understand the inclusive requirements of neurodivergent students, the lived experiences of the research students would suggest that directly addressing the specific barriers to safety, acceptance and understanding may not be the most effective way of achieving inclusion. In practical terms, zero tolerance will not eliminate bullying while differences are viewed negatively, the inclusive acceptance of autistic students is unlikely without peer understanding of the value of all kinds of differences, and organisational and pedagogical responses to individual requirements will continue to inadvertently stigmatise until the same options and considerations are available for all students not just autistic students.

The current state of inclusivity for autistic students may be the result of approaches that are focused on meeting requirements of individuals without a broader context. It raises the question, are differences in neurology a disorder and a problem to be addressed, or is diversity a natural and essential part of human evolution to be accommodated equitably in all circumstances?

In the same way that cultural diversity is celebrated, sexual diversity has been embraced and gender diversity is being supported, acceptance of neurological diversity as a valued part of human existence may be the context that is needed to drive the changes that are required to ensure full inclusion in mainstream schooling. The starting point for comprehensive change would then be the cultural inclusion of neurodiversity. This would involve understanding neurodivergence as a different brain operating in a different way, neither superior nor inferior. This is the understanding of autism as a brain **wired differently, not weirdly different.**

Embracing neurodiversity with its many variations has been endorsed by the South Australian Government with its new initiatives with universities to ensure that topics such as Neurodiversity in the Classroom are part of teacher training from 2024 onwards. In welcoming this commitment, Kate Daniels, a member of an autistic family had this to say in the Government's Press Release.

> Schools and educators have a unique and privileged opportunity to help create inclusive and neuro-affirming environments and culture within school classrooms and communities. An inclusive society benefits everybody. I hope [the initiative] creates learning environments that are safe, educators who are knowledgeable allies, children and young people that feel confident in self-advocating and connected communities who embrace diversity and celebrate it(Autism CRC, 2023 website accessed 8/07/2024).

Webster and Roberts (2022) researched the change process needed in schools to achieve the objective of inclusion and argued that a whole-of-school approach was necessary to "build the capacity of school leaders and staff to create inclusive school cultures, implement evidence-based strategies, and improve outcomes for [autistic] students"(p. 796). The objective is to develop a culture of acceptance of neurodiversity, pedagogical approaches that understand neurological differences, the creation of

safe and supportive environments, and organisational management that is flexible and proactive. The lived experiences of the autistic students in this study have highlighted the need for a comprehensive approach to the creation of an inclusive school culture. The change process would need to draw on the lived experiences of families, teachers and autistic students to guide successful implementation of evidence-based strategies facilitating full inclusion of neurodivergent students(Roberts & Webster, 2022). Sampling the views of neurotypical students and their families to ensure that the processes and pedagogies were fair and equitable for all students might help to prevent inadvertent stigmatisation.

The challenge is to bring together the neurodivergent and the neurotypical in a culture of embracement and celebration of neurodiversity.

8.4　Conclusion

Despite the best efforts of the school to provide adjustments and support for the autistic students in this research, what became apparent was the lack of a context for the promotion and understanding of autism. The required context is neurodiversity, and the understanding of brains being wired differently, but equally competent and valued. School wide education on neurodiversity is the recommended action to address the obstacles to full inclusion for autistic students. The objective would be a culture where disorders are reframed as differences, disabilities are recognised as the result of environmental barriers, and inclusive diversity is valued as essential for human development. From this framework, it would be possible through evidence-based approaches such as Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Instruction to develop mainstream educational institutions that equally recognise and accommodate many kinds of differences in the one inclusive setting. The importance of regularly hearing the voices of autistic students was highlighted by this research as a necessary process of ensuring that actions were based on evidence, and objectives were being achieved without further stigmatisation of neurodivergent students. Sampling of the lived experiences of neurotypical students might also be important to gauge whether they are incorporating the cultural shift without feeling disadvantaged or neglected.

Recommendations of a general nature applicable for all schools are in Appendix F.

Appendix A: Ethics Approval

21 December 2023.

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL NOTICE

Dear Dr Bev Rogers,

The below proposed project has been approved on the basis of the information contained in the application and its attachments.

Project No: 6578

Project Title: Inclusion at High School for Autism - The Lived Experience of a Cohort of Autistic students at a Large Metropolitan High School

Chief Investigator: Dr Bev Rogers

Approval Date: 21/12/2023

Expiry Date: 30/12/2024

Approved Co-Investigator/s: Mr. Graham Forbes

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Feeling Safe.
Q1. Looking back over the past five years of your schooling, how Safe did you feel at school?

Feeling Accepted.
Q1. Looking back over the past five years of your schooling, how Accepted did you feel at school?

Feeling Understood.
Q1. Looking back over the past five years of your schooling, how much did you feel Understood at school?

Appendix C: Crafted Stories.

Crafted Stories – 38

P1 Crafted Story Titles.
1. A chance to re-invent myself.
2. Being the odd one out.
3. Being able to be myself.
4. Covert bullying.
5. The benefits of high expectations.
6. Creating safe spaces.
7. Getting to Know You
8. With the best of intentions.
9. Having someone I could trust.

P2 Crafted Story Titles
1. Past School Trauma.
2. Accepting Difference.
3. Not Being Seen
4. Scary Classrooms.
5. Victim Support
6. Plausible Deniability
7. Being different and being accepted.

P3 Crafted Stories.
1. The legacy of primary school.
2. Not standing out.
3. On being studious.
4. Masking to fit in.
5. Being different.
6. A range of tolerance.
7. Not being seen.

P4 Crafted Story Titles
1. Finding myself in the presence of hope.
2. With the best of intentions.
3. No-one would listen to me.
4. I am different.
5. Unconscious exclusion.
6. Life at the edge.
7. Proactive inclusion
8. Guilt by association.
9. Someone I could trust.

P5 Crafted Stories

1. Primary School memories
2. A testing time
3. Bullying
4. Before diagnosis
5. After diagnosis
6. Not seen, not heard

Appendix D: Sample Crafted Story

P1 - Crafted Story – Re-inventing Myself.

Brackets [ ] indicate words inserted by the researcher.

At my high school, in my five years there studying, I found it quite exciting at the beginning because I thought, well, this is a new opportunity to meet new people and to reinvent myself. So, I feel like I was accepted more than previously at my primary school, especially by the teachers.

At PS people saw how different I was to them; people just saw me as different and they didn't like that at all. And I found it hard to connect with people, especially even teachers, not giving me a chance there. So, I thought, once I'm at high school, I've got a chance to change and get new opportunities that I wouldn't have before. For example, at PS, I wasn't even allowed to participate in the musical in year six, which was frustrating for me.

In year 8 I became pretty academically focused and that was good. I wasn't so much socially focused. I'd meet people and I would connect with some people, but it wasn't mainly about that to me. I just saw it as the academic side.

I felt like I had a better place than at primary school because there wereso many more people and I felt more known as well. And I seemed to have a lot more respect. Not that it was great, but still there were people out there that would talk to me actively.

I think the staffing cohort were fantastic because they mostly were accepting, and they had resources in place. I know there were good teachers literally for that purpose of helping everyone engaged in their learning, no matter how different or how, 'normal' to what society standards are they were. There were some great staff members there to support you. As for students, there's always going to be great groups of people that are accepting.

Description

The student, in reflection on their primary school experiences, is determined to make 'a new start' in connecting to other students to feel more 'at home' and accepted at secondary school, recognised for what they can do and given 'a chance' to show themselves as successful.

Explanation

P1 started high school with excitement about behaving in a different way and possibly because of this positivity they created the circumstances that helped them to be more known and understood. Now at the end of five years, they have reflected on their primary school years and acknowledged it as not a very positive experience. High school was seen as a new start opportunity due to the large number of students who would not know them and not have any pre-existing judgement about them. They have perceived that they would need to make a change in their own behaviour (re-invent themselves) and saw having an academic focus rather than a social focus as a way of behaving that would be less likely to mark them as different in a negative way.

P1 found that they were known by more people in a respectful way at high school than at primary school possibly because of the larger number and therefore greater likelihood of connecting with other students that understood and accepted them. It may well be that it was not only the larger number of students that made the difference but the opportunity for them to be seen in a more acceptable way.

P1's experienced a very troubled time at primary school. In contrast, they have been relatively well included at high school. Their acknowledgement of the accepting and supportive nature of the general staff and the existence of specialist staff to assist the successful engagement of all students and provided them with a more positive way of seeing themselves.

Appendix E: HREC Consent Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM

Title: "Inclusion at High School for Autism"

Chief Investigator
Dr. Bev Rogers
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work
Flinders University
Tel: 08 82013911

Co-Investigator
Mr Graham FORBES
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work
Flinders University
Tel: 0406944162

My name is Graham Forbes and I am a Flinders University Masters student. I am undertaking this research as part of my degree. You may remember me as the Neurodivergence Advisor and Inclusive Education teacher. For further information about this research project, you are more than welcome to contact my Chief Investigator. Her details are listed above.

Description of the study
This project will investigate the lived experience of students with autism at a Northridge high school. This project is supported by Flinders University, College of Education, Psychology and Social Work.

Purpose of the study
This project aims to find out whether students with autism have been successfully included in mainstream education and have felt safe, accepted and understood.

Benefits of the study
The sharing of your experiences will help to inform future planning o/f school support systems and pedagogies for students with autism.

Participant involvement and potential risks
If you agree to participate in the research study, you will be asked to attend a one-on-one interview with a researcher that will be audio recorded. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes.

The Interview will be conducted by myself with all appropriate and current Working with Children Checks.

Withdrawal Rights

You may decline to take part in this research study. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you have the right to withdraw from further participation at any stage without providing an explanation or experiencing any consequences. To withdraw, please contact the Chief Investigator to have your data removed from the study. Any data collected up to the point of your withdrawal will be securely destroyed.

Confidentiality and Privacy
Only researchers listed on this form have access to the individual information provided by you. Researchers will take all possible steps to ensure privacy and confidentiality will be adhered to at all times.

No data, including identifiable, non-identifiable and de-identified datasets, will be shared or used in future research projects without your explicit consent. Audio and video recordings will be transcribed by Google Teams. Please provide your consent to this by ticking the appropriate box on the Consent Form at the end of this form.

Data Storage
The information collected will be stored securely throughout the study and on the Flinders University Secure Server. Any identifiable data will be de-identified for data storage purposes unless indicated otherwise. All data will be securely stored on Flinders University One Drive for one year after publication of the Coursework Project. Following the required data storage period, all data will be securely destroyed according to university protocols.

How will I receive feedback?
On project completion, a short summary of the outcomes will be provided to all participants via email with an option to be sent the final report. A copy of the report will be forwarded to the school with care taken to reduce any chance of participants being identified after any participants who have indicated their desire to read the report have done so and endorsed it as a fair representation of what was said.

Ethics Committee Approval
The project has been approved by Flinders University's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC project number 6578).

Queries and Concerns
Queries or concerns regarding the research can be directed to the research team. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this study, you may contact the Flinders University's Research Ethics and Compliance Office team either via telephone (08) 8201 2543 or by emailing the Office via human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet which is yours to keep.

If you accept our invitation to be involved, please sign the enclosed Consent Form.

By completing/submitting this survey, you are consenting to participate in this study and to the conditions outlined in the Participant Information Form.

Appendix F: Recommendations

Based on the research cohorts' experiences and feelings of not being safe, accepted and understood and the literature review supporting their concerns, the following are issues that may need to be addressed and suggested steps towards equitable inclusivity for autistic students.

1. Develop a school wide culture of acceptance and celebration of neurodiversity.

2. Structure professional development processes that raise awareness of autism issues and barriers to successful inclusion.

3. Establish ongoing peer education on neurodiversity and inclusion.

4. Review school bullying policies and student awareness to ensure that intention to harm is understood as peer aggression and victims and perpetrators are appropriately supported.

5. Explore ways that school environments can be modified to be more neurodivergent affirming.

6. Review classroom management practices to create more conducive learning environments for all students.

7. Investigate the adoption and integration of pedagogical approaches and management strategies such as Differentiated Instruction (DI) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) that allow for more flexibility to cater for neurodivergent students in a non-stigmatising manner.

8. Consider the introduction of bespoke transition processes for individual autistic students from primary to high school.

9. Establish regular processes for listening to autistic students as an essential part of feedback for professional development.

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