"IT'S NOT HOME. BUT IT IS AS CLOSE TO HOME AS SCHOOL CAN GET"

EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF 'SCHOOL BELONGING' WITH

AUTISTIC ADOLESCENTS ATTENDING A SOCIAL COMMUNICATION HUB:

AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

By

EMILY NICOLE WILLIAMSON

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The Department of Disability, Inclusion and Special Needs (DISN)

School of Education

College of Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

The conceptualisation of successful and genuine inclusion for secondary-school aged students on the autism spectrum is widely contested in education; and predominantly understood through the unrepresentative lens of non-autistic adults. Autistic students frequently express the same desires to be as included as their neurotypical peers, defining inclusion as feeling a sense of belonging, connection and value (Goodall, 2018a, 2018b). Yet, autistic students continue to be excluded from school at disproportionate rates (DfE, 2016) and some students report feelings of dissatisfaction and extrication (Goodall, 2018a, 20018b; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008, Tobias, 2009).

A popular provision in many local authorities is the building of resource hubs. These are specialist bases attached to mainstream schools which are portrayed as providing inclusive experiences with specialist tailored support. Qualitative research into resource bases is extremely limited at present and primarily investigates staff and parental views (bron & Bond, 2017; Bond & Hebron, 2016; Fredrickson et al, 2010). Very little is known about what helps and hinders belonging for pupils accessing this provision from their own perspectives.

This research explores the lived experiences of four adolescents (12 – 15 years) who attend a secondary school based social communication hub and their experiences of school belonging within this context. It adopts multimodal participatory approaches (photo-elicitation, drawing, Lego) and semi-structured interviews. Such non-directive methodology has the potential to empower participants to lead the research interview in a structured way, allowing discussions of what the students deem to be of importance, rather than re-producing adult-centric perspectives. Findings constructed themes of safety, acceptance, accomplishment, understanding and connection as

fundamental in promoting a sense of belonging. Practices in place needed to permeate whole school ethos and culture, and could not be restricted to the specialist hub. Students stressed the importance of relationships in fostering these feelings, alongside the built environment and teaching structures such as appropriate differentiation, and individualisation. Opportunities for meaningful participation were of key importance. Equally, some students did not seek social experiences from their education and would rather these needs be met in other contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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GLOSSARY

ASC   Autistic Spectrum Condition

CFA   Children and Families Act

CoP   Code of Practice

DfE   Department for Education

DfES   Department for Education and Skills

DH   Department of Health

EHCP   Education, Health and Care Plan

EP   Educational Psychologist

EPS   Educational Psychology Service

IPA   Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

LA   Local Authority

PSOC   Psychological Sense of Community

SEN   Special Educational Needs

SEND   Special Educational Needs and Disability

SLCN   Speech, Language and Communication Needs

SOB   Sense of Belonging

SOSB   Sense of School Belonging

TEP   Trainee Educational Psychologist

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This research forms volume one of a two-part thesis to meet the requirements for the Applied Educational and Child Psychology Doctorate at the University of Birmingham. The Covid-19 pandemic impacted on this research in a number of ways, as outlined in Appendix A. This study explores the lived experiences of belonging for autistic students who attend a social-communication hub, a resource provision which forms part of a mainstream secondary school. Research suggests that autistic students can find it difficult to develop a sense of school connectiveness (Hebron, 2018) and their experiences of mainstream education can include physical, social, and emotional exclusion (Goodall, 2018a, 2018b; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008, Tobias, 2009). Students can attribute this to a poor understanding of them from adults and ostracization and rejection from their peers (Goodall, 2018a). However, rather than resulting in school reform, this can lead to questions about the appropriateness of placement and the consideration of specialist provision.

Hubs are often positioned as an integrated approach to inclusion, which can support school belongingness by offering specialist knowledge and expertise alongside inclusive social experiences (White, 2010). However, the literature base around the use of hubs for students is limited. Within this study, a combination of researcher led and participant-led methodologies were adopted which facilitated four autistic students to share their experiences of attending this educational provision, within the wider context of Covid 19. Photo-elicitation interviews allowed students to introduce their own topics and control what was discussed in the interview. It also aimed to address the power dynamics at play when conducting research with children (Berger, Mohr & Philbert, 1982)

This chapter gives an overview of the national and local research context, explains my terminology usage throughout the thesis and outlines my positionality as a researcher.

1.2 National Context

1.2.1 Autism

Autism is defined as "*a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world*" (National Autistic Society, 2021). Although it is a spectrum conditions which affects individuals differently and to varying degree, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – fifth edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) characterises autism by

- Persistent differences in communication, interpersonal relationships, and social interaction across different environments
- Restricted and repetitive behaviour, patterns, activities and interests.

The number of children being identified on the autism spectrum is increasing. In 2020/21, government data shows that autism was the most common need among students with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and more special schools identified provision for autistic students than students with any other identified special educational need and disability (SEND) (Department for Education (DfE), 2021).

Over the decades, there has been much debate as to how to conceptualise and write about autism between researchers, advocates, and members of the autism community (Vivanti, 2020; Dunn& Andrews, 2015; Botha et al, 2021). Aligning with research conducted by Kenny et al (2016), who surveyed 3,470 autistic people to

understand their preferences, this thesis adopts identity first language (autistic student) rather than person-first language (student with autism).

1.2.2 Inclusion for Autistic Students

Much of the research into education and autism has focused on inclusion yet there is little evidence in the literature to constitute what type of placements best meet these learners' needs (Jones, 2008). Within the autistic research community, two dominant perspectives of inclusion have arisen: a rights-based perspective and a needs-based perspective. Rights-based researchers disagree with specialist provision and argue for an end to all educational segregation (Ravet, 2011). They believe that the needs of autistic students are shared by many other learners. By singling out autistic students, it implies that mainstream teachers cannot teach these learners without expertise, which they argue may reinforce exclusionary practices (Ravet, 2011). Pratt (1997) links this to ethos, stating "…good schools are good schools for all. And good teachers are good teachers for any student." (p1-2).

However, other researchers argue that mainstream inclusion can lead to poorer social outcomes for some autistic children and increased exclusion (Warnock, 2005; Ravet, 2011). They believe that without secure knowledge and a holistic understanding of autism, teachers will be ill-equipped to understand behaviours and responses; assess need; and adapt teaching and the environment accordingly. As a result, inappropriate intervention may be employed which does not meet students' needs (Ravet, 2011).

The discourse around inclusion often positions these perspectives in direct conflict, with mainstream education positioned against specialist provision, rather than centring these approaches so they work in unison. It has been suggested that a

spectrum of need should be met by a spectrum of provision rather than the limited options of mainstream or specialist schools (Harvey, 2011). A hub is a type of specially resourced provision which forms part of mainstream schools and is portrayed as providing inclusive experiences with specialist tailored support (White, 2010). Parental views of inclusive placements are consistently more positive where there is an autism hub in the school (Lindsay et al, 2016).

1.2.3 Specialist Hubs

Government data shows that in the academic year 2020/21, there were 352 schools with SEND units and 1,066 schools with a resourced provision in England (DfE, 2021).

The Department for Education (DfE, 2021) defines hub resourced provision as

> "…*places that are reserved at a mainstream school for pupils with a specific type of SEN, taught mainly within mainstream classes, but requiring a base and some specialist facilities around the school.*"

There is also the expectation that students are taught specific skills (such as social skills) or receive therapy in the base, with all other national curriculum learning occurring alongside their mainstream peers (DfE, 2015). However, there is no clear guidance on their purpose, application, or outcomes (DfE, 2015); for example, schools within some LAs operate their resourced provision independently; whereas others adopt a panel process.

This contrasts with SEND units, which are defined as "…*special provisions within a mainstream school where pupils with SEN are taught mainly within separate classes.*" (DfE, 2021). This can be considered less inclusive practice.

Terminology around resourced provision also varies considerably with interchangeable terms including "resource bases" "specialist hubs" "resourced hubs" "SEND hub" "SEND base" "focused provision" and "resourced unit". This variability made accessing relevant literature extremely difficult. Within the LA the research took place, the term "hub" is used; and will be the terminology I adopt throughout this thesis.

1.2.4 Belonging and Inclusion

Although hub provision addresses 'locational inclusion'; the physical geography of a student cannot ensure their educational inclusion. Inclusion definitions also consider factors such as presence, participation, acceptance and achievement (Humphrey, 2008). In the Removing Barriers to Achievement paper (DfES, 2004), it is noted that

> '…*inclusion is about much more than the type of school that children attend: it is about the quality of their experience; how they are helped to learn, achieve and participate fully in the life of the school.*' (p.25)

Goodall (2018a) spoke with autistic students about the concept of inclusion and concluded that "*Inclusion is a feeling (a sense of belonging), not a place (mainstream or otherwise)*" (p 27). Belongingness therefore needs to remain central to the conceptualisation of inclusion (Frederickson et al., 2007; Thomas & Loxley, 2001). This was also acknowledged by Warnock (2005, p.15):

> *The concept of inclusion must embrace the feeling of belonging, since such a feeling appears to be necessary both for successful learning and for more general wellbeing"*

Belongingness is particularly relevant to education, as schools can provide the environments and conditions to facilitate a sense of membership for students. Thus,

sense of school belonging is the key focus of my research and I am interested in how this is fostered within a specialist hub.

1.3 Local Research Context

This research was undertaken in a geographically large rural Local Authority (LA). In 2013, the LA approved the development of hub provision to enable access to suitable, cost effective specialist provision for autistic students without the need to travel out of county. A secondary social-communication hub was set up in 2014 with a strict access criteria to obtain a placement. A description of the secondary hub, the inclusionary criteria and the placing process can be found in Appendix D. This is accompanied by a reflective commentary.

In the academic year 2019/2020, 3.3% (1448 students) of the school-aged population in the LA had an EHCP (DfE, 2020). 3.1% of these learners had a primary need identified as autism, which is considerably below the national (England) average of 7.9%. Within specialist settings, this percentage is even lower (2.1% of students in specialist settings in the LA have a primary need of autism in contrast to 29.8% in the rest of England) (DfE, 2020). Further information and reflections on this can be found in Appendix C.

1.4 Focus of the Research and what led to this

In 2019, the LA asked me to support a school in setting up a new social-communication hub provision for autistic students. During this project, I was surprised by the paucity of research in this area, particularly in relation to student voice. Furthermore, no data had been gathered from autistic students who were already attending the existing hub as to their lived experiences of attending such a provision. I believe that when decisions are fully informed using children's views, they are "more relevant more

effective and more sustainable (Lansdown, 2011, p5)". From a legislative perspective, there is also a statutory duty for LAs to keep provision for students with SEND under review, in order to ensure that the provision reflects and addresses local needs (The Children and Families Act, 2014). This review process should involve the students who access such provision, as young people's active participation in decision making has been reflected in international law since 1989 (Article 12 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Thus, the focus of this study was to contribute to an understanding of how autistic secondary-school students attending an existing social-communication specialist hub experience and made sense of school belongingness and the practises which facilitate this. Belongingness is a unique and subjective connection which is context, time and place dependent. It was therefore felt that only the students themselves could comment on this feeling within school, so views were not sought from staff or parents. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was utilised, requiring the researcher to make sense of students' sense-making. This involved engaging in reflexivity throughout every stage of the research journey. Although this meant that the findings may not be generalisable to the new hub setting, it did allow a thick and rich detailed account into existing good practice and possible theoretical generalisability.

1.5 Researcher Positionality

Adopting an IPA methodological approach in my research necessitates that I reflect and acknowledge my own influences and axiology as a researcher and how these may influence my decisions and actions (Maxwell, 2012). I have summarised my positionality, experiences, and values in Table 1.

Table 1. Researcher Positionality

Researcher Position and Values
My Experiences   • At the time of this research, I was a trainee educational psychologist (TEP) working to systemically support children and young people in all contexts of their lives . My role also involved writing statutory advice to inform educational provision (but not placement). I may therefore have been perceived as having an influence on the Local Authority (LA). I had shadowed a specialist placement panel to understand the decision-making process which occurred when a specialist hub was being considered.   • On starting the project, I reflected that I was somewhat biased against hubs as my experiences working as a TEP had suggested that some schools may have positioned hubs as an opt-out to engaging in inclusive practices themselves.   • I live and grew up in the same LA as I was on placement, and attended a mainstream secondary school discussed by two of my participants. I therefore tried to bracket off my (positive) experiences of this setting as to not to influence the discussion.   Historically, I have worked as: • An assistant psychologist at a residential specialist school for autistic children and young people (primary, secondary and sixth form), some of whom attended for 52 weeks a year. This role involved lots of reflection with students, particularly those preparing for adulthood. Students were away from their local community, their family and placed in a very rural location

where they both lived and were educated Some students described the residential school as a "bubble" which shielded them from the "real world" and they felt disconnected from their local community. Sense of belonging was even more convoluted as many students were 'Looked After' by the LA and several students had experienced multiple school exclusions Equally, some children shared how much safer, valued and accepted they felt in a specialist setting in contrast to their mainstream schools. Frequent organisational restructuring demonstrated how sense of belonging could change within the same place as school communities are not material things but concepts which are relationally constructed.

- An assistant educational psychologist for an urban local authority. My role involved being part of the professional identification and diagnosis pathway of autism for students aged 5-18 and supporting the family and school during the process. This involved working collaboratively to make mainstream environments more inclusive for autistic students following diagnosis.

These experiences inevitably left me with preconceptions and assumptions about the practice to support autistic learners within both mainstream and specialist settings.

My Values

- I believe autistic young people are worthy and capable of recognition, respect and voice in research

- I believe that as a society, we should work to remove barriers to participation and opportunities for all children and young people.

- I am supportive of the inclusion agenda and believe in promoting choice, agency and autonomy amongst children and young people.

<u>Autism</u>

- I recognise that I do not have a diagnosis of autism myself (although I understand that autism and social communication needs are spectrum needs and some traits associated with autism are evident within myself). Thus, my ability to make sense of the experiences of autistic adolescents may be limited. The double empathy problem is a criticism often made when non-autistic researchers complete research with the autistic community and this can possibly lead to mutual misunderstanding which can impact on authenticity (Milton, 2012). Smith et al (2009) refer to the principle of reflexivity as a way of considering our biases and how they may impact on interpretations. In IPA, a dual interpretation occurs. The participant is asked to make sense of a phenomenon by interpreting it and communicating it to the researcher. The researcher then has to interpret what has been said using their own experience and position it in the wider social, cultural and theoretical context. It is therefore understood that there may be discrepancies between the participant's words and the researcher's interpretation of those words. By acknowledging this and taking a critical stance regarding power dynamics and presumed expertise (for example, through reflecting on potential biases and experiences), it may help reduce the possibility of marginalising or misrepresenting my participants (MacLeod, 2019).

1.6 Significance of the Topic and Relevance to Educational Psychology

Understanding school belonging from the perspective of students is critical for various reasons. Firstly, the educational psychologist (EP) role involves supporting a diverse population of learners to facilitate wellbeing as well as contributing to their academic progress. The research-base suggests that belongingness is linked to many positive psychological, mental health and academic benefits (Prince & Hadwin, 2013; Anderman, 2002) including higher self-esteem (Haslam et al, 2009) reduced suicidal ideations; lower aggression and fewer bullying incidents (Kidger et al., 2012). Early adolescents who perceive themselves to belong in school also report less stress, self-consciousness and school-related anxiety (Goodenow, 1993). Research also suggests that belongingness can positively impact academic outcomes including student motivation, school completion, and academic achievement (Bond et al, 2007; Goodenow, 1993).

Secondly, it is recognised as the school's responsibility to create an environment and community which promotes a sense of belonging (Wehlage, 1989). EPs work systemically to support school systems and have a strong knowledge base in theories underpinning belonging. They can use these principles to promote staff understanding, policy and ethos to support all students, as well as develop interventions and shape environments to be more inclusive (Wigford & Higgins, 2019; Cockerill, 2019). Student voice can help inform such approaches by understanding what makes a difference for specific individuals and demographics.

Thirdly, EPs are involved in the specialist placement panel process and support decision making as to which students may benefit from accessing hub provision. Having a more thorough understanding of students experiences of this provision may help to inform appropriate placement and wider influential factors which may be

impacting on student belongingness. As all pupils need an EHCP to access the provision, they will all have been assessed by an EP. The findings of this research may influence hypothesises made, questions posed and formulations adopted by EPs in this process.

Fourthly, like all adults, EPs have a safeguarding responsibility and research suggests that students who do not feel like they belong may seek membership to anti-social groups (Sharkey et al, 2010) or place them at risk of exploitation (Kaestle, 2012).

Finally, although children themselves cannot enforce their views being listened to (Hobbs et al, 2000); EPs and other professionals, are well positioned to advocate for young people and orchestrate change at the individual, organisational and system level. Research is one way of achieving this.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review explores how belonging is experienced, enacted and facilitated for autistic students in school; the perceived demarcation of those who belong and those who do not and who has the power to make such decisions.

Conducting the literature review helped me to clarify my research questions and narrow my focus through frequent cyclic reflection. Thomas (2017) argues that a literature review should tell a story. Thus, I aimed to guide and funnel the reader from the general (what it means to belong) to the specific (the role of resource bases for promoting belonging for autistic students).

Initial systematic searches investigating autism and belonging resulted in a multitude of papers (571), leading me to feel overwhelmed and unsure where to focus. Furthermore, when attempting to research resource bases specifically, the number of synonyms made it difficult to ensure all papers were included. Bennet (2014) argues that "place" is often omitted in discussions of belonging. Furthermore, the setting research takes place in is not always featured in the abstract, title or keyword. Thus, some papers were identified through the reading of other papers and their use of referencing.

I was unsure whether my central themes should focus on the inclusion agenda, belonging in schools, the autistic community, or the unique role and function of specialist hubs. A number of structures were trialled but it was felt that a clear narrative and funnel was missing resulting in a fragmented and repetitive narrative.

I therefore developed some key aims and questions which I wanted my literature review to address. These were as follows:

- How is belonging currently conceptualised and understood and how is this applied to schools?

- What are the key psychological principles underpinning belonging? I felt this could address a gap in the literature given that many papers were from an educational perspective rather than a psychological perspective.

- What does research tell us facilitates a SOSB for autistic students?

- Synthesising what I had learned from the above 3 questions and applying it to the limited research into specialist hubs.

- Identifying the key gaps in the literature and how this guided my own research. For example, the paucity of research which included student voice.

As a result of this process, my literature review is divided into five parts as shown in Table 2. This helped to focus my search strategy and reduce the number of papers I needed to consider (as shown in Appendix B).

Table 2: Structure of the Literature Review

Part One: Conceptualising Belonging	Exploring universal and school specific conceptualisations of 'belonging'. I argue that such conceptualisations centre on non-autistic populations and the research-base for sense of school belonging (SOSB) with autistic students is extremely limited.
Part Two: Psychological Theories of Belonging	Linking conceptualisation to psychological theory through the lens of the belonging hypothesis (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and psychological sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Part Three: **Facilitators and Barriers to School Belonging**	Using Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) Bioecosystemic model to summarise how autistic students feel their SOSB is fostered or demoted due to practices within schools, and how existing interventions, processes and cultures can enforce inclusion or exclusion.
Part Four: **Belonging in Specialist Hubs**	Outlining the limited research evidence into specialist hubs and if and how they meet the needs of learners.
Part Five: Focus of the Research	Positioning the aims of this research study and it's unique contribution within the wider evidence base.

Part One: Conceptualising Belonging

The conceptualisation of belonging is complex and not universally agreed. It is defined as a perception of connectedness, community, relatedness and acceptance within a group, system or place (Osterman, 2000). Mahar et al (2013) conducted a narrative review to develop a shared transdisciplinary definition and conceptualisation of belonging; scoping 22 qualitative articles. They suggested that belonging should be understood as being a multifaceted concept, as defined in Table 3.

Table 3: Adapted from Mahar et al's (2013) Transdisciplinary Definition of Belonging

Concept	Definition
Subjectivity	How group membership makes an individual feel, with explicit reference to perceptions of value and respect and fitting in.

Groundedness	Belonging to a referent group or place. Individuals can belong to several different referent groups. The external referent within this thesis is school and/or the specialist hub.
Reciprocity	A sense of connectedness created through shared feelings, histories, beliefs, understandings and experiences.
Dynamism	The role of the wider environment (both physical and social) on belonging and the transient nature of belonging.
Self-determinism	The rights of individuals to choose their interactions and the power dynamics within these. Reference is made to individuals who may qualify for membership of a specific group due to their personal characteristics (e.g. attendance of a school) but still not achieve a sense of belonging within that group. This may be due to discriminatory power and oppression or an individual's choice to not belong.

Although this conceptualisation appeared thorough and resonated with my own understanding of belonging, sense of belonging can be context specific and conflicting (Mahar et al, 2013) and thus universal definitions may be misleading when examining specific contexts in detail. Mahar et al (2013) only included four papers relating to belongingness in school. Adolescents spend a substantial amount of time in educational contexts and thus the school environment plays a key role in meeting the need to belong (Allen & Bowles, 2012). Schools provide an environment where socialisation occurs and a stage to perform group or individual identities (Brown, 2011). Therefore specific definitions relevant to school contexts require additional analysis.

Goodenow and Grady (1993) define sense of school belonging (SOSB) as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). Whilst this aligns well with Mahar et al's (2013) concept of 'subjectivity', it negates the wider implications and components of belonging such as that of autonomy. Full-time schooling is a legal requirement up until the age of 16 and social groupings and spaces are often assigned rather than actively sought through choice. Furthermore, these conceptualisations revolve around adult perspectives and there is a paucity of research in the school domain which conceptualises SOSB by students themselves. Craggs and Kelly (2018) completed a meta-synthesis of this which incorporated just 8 qualitative papers. Their search was iterative and purposeful as opposed to exhaustive. Four key themes were constructed:

- Positive social relationships

- Recognition, acceptance and understanding of individual identity

- Safety and security

- Group membership.

This ultimately led to the higher-order concept of "…*school belonging as 'feeling safe to be yourself in and through relationships with others in the school setting" (Craggs and Kelly, 2018, p1411)* as depicted in Figure 1.

They concluded that the relational aspect of belonging is critical in this conceptualisation, and this is supported by Halse (2018, p4) who argues that "*Because the belonging that arises through connectedness is an active social process of everyday life, it is necessarily always relational*". This may have impacts for young people who have difficulties forming such relationships. Many autistic students are identified to form fewer friendships in school (Humphrey & Symes,

2011) and can find the formation and maintenance of relationships particularly tricky; although this is not to say that relationships are any less important to them (Daniel & Billingsley, 2010).

Autistic students can also be regular recipients of negative judgements, peer rejection, stigma, and victimisation by non-autistic people (Laws et al, 2012;

Figure 1: Craggs and Kelly (2018) Conceptualisation of School Belonging

Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Sasson et al., 2017) making schools potentially feel less safe. How autistic students specifically conceptualise and experience belonging was therefore of interest, although research into this is even more scarce. A systematic search identified just 3 qualitative papers exploring this concept from students'

perspectives (Myles, 2017; Basel & Hamilton, 2019; Goodall, 2018a,– Please see Appendix B for systematic search criteria).

Myles (2017) gained the perspectives of school belonging for eight adolescent autistic females. One of the three the settings studied had an autism base. Myles' interviews were supported by visual tools such as the blob playground and scaling measures. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis and themes constructed on "reciprocal friendships"; "feeling safe and supported"; "encouragement and inclusion"; "opportunities to talk it through"; "feeling understood" and "establishing and adhering to social expectations". The themes correspond to question grouping in her interview schedule and although analysis was inductive, students may have merely commented on the themes proposed to them and confirmed adult-centred narratives. Ultimately, these themes do correspond with Mahar et al's (2013) concepts of subjectivity, groundedness and reciprocity whilst also aligning with Craggs and Kelly's (2018) focus on safety. Self-determinism is discussed in reference to the participants' feelings of discrimination and the need to change their behaviours or mask their autism in order to fit in.

Basel and Hamilton (2019) reflected on a series of narrative interviews with a Year 9 autistic boy about his experiences of school belonging. They explicitly asked questions relating to the transition into school, classroom experiences and peer relationships. Themes were not shared in their published research although they summarise that relational approaches (reciprocity) and opportunities to demonstrate agency (self-determination) were of key importance. Dynamism is embedded throughout the research given that the participant reflects on how his sense of school belonging changes over time. The student felt he had to stay quiet in order not to be noticed; possibly preferring to be invisible rather than seeking to belong.

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Finally, Goodall (2018a) utilised a range of participatory methodologies to gain a deeper insight into how twelve secondary-aged autistic students experienced inclusion and school belonging. Experiences were largely framed negatively, with themes including "feelings of dread", "feelings of isolation" "feeling misunderstood" and "feeling unsupported". Students defined inclusion and belonging as "being able to be oneself by being respected, valued and accepted by teachers and peers for the person who they are" (Goodall, 2018a, p20). All participants in Goodall's study were attending an alternative provision due to difficulties accessing the mainstream environment and thus were less likely to have experienced successful inclusionary practice. It is also possible that some implicit biases were made, given possible political agendas (such as the researcher being the Head of the Alternative Provision). Language used in the interviews may also have been leading (e.g. "*How do you feel about the fact that all young people are **made** to go to mainstream*")

Overall, repetitive themes of needing connection, acceptance, safety and understanding were prominent in the research base, although there were feelings that autistic students often needed to change who they were or where they were taught in order to fit in. Within my research diary, I also reflected on whether the notion that an autistic individual may conceptualise belonging differently to a non-autistic individual may be othering in itself and contribute to a narrative that autistic individuals are fundamentally different to the wider population.

Part Two: Psychological Theories of Belonging

It is important for EPs to have a robust understanding of the psychological theories which underpin the conceptualisation of belongingness. Three key theories are discussed below: the belonging hypothesis; social identity theory; and a psychological sense of community.

2.2.1 The Belonging Hypothesis

Baumeister and Leary's (1995) 'belonging hypothesis' is a key theory which is well cited in the literature. It holds three central assumptions. Firstly, people have a fundamental need to belong which acts as a universal motivator to maintain social relationships. Secondly, a minimum number of intimate relationships are necessary which need to be maintained over time. Social contact with others is insufficient to meet the need to belong, and individuals must therefore have regular and meaningful interactions with people whom they feel connected. Thirdly, interactions do not need to be explicitly positive to satisfy the need to belong, they just cannot be negative.

The idea of belonging as a 'human need' is not novel and has been propositioned by numerous other psychologists. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1962) positions belonging (and love) as one of five critical human needs. Learning, personal development and self-actualisation are not possible without a sense of belonging. Evidence to fully support Maslow's theory is sparse (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976), particularly in regards to the order of the hierarchy. Furthermore, the premise of these needs is rooted in western culture within college populations and may not be representative of the motivations of other cultures, societies and individuals (Hofstede, 1984; Cianci & Gambrel, 2003). Nevertheless, research has shown that the proposed consequences of not successfully maintaining reciprocal relationships are severe, including depression, anxiety, loneliness, ill- health and antisocial behaviours (Osterman, 2000). Cognitive processing, health and mortality rates can also be impacted (Baumeister et al. 2002; Lynch, 1979) which does suggest its necessity.

In contrast to these theories, Mahar et al (2013) identify self-determination as a key factor of belonging. The concept of choice suggests that humans have agency as to whether or not they want to belong. Butler and Muir (2017) also emphasise the role of agency when conceptualising belonging and how adolescents choose and expend effort into remaining connected to both places and people. Although Kanner (1943) proposed that autistic individuals may choose not to interact due to a preference to be alone; this is not a widely accepted interpretation today (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000) and research suggests that autistic students want to be included and befriended in the same ways as their non-autistic peers (O'Hagan and Hebron, 2017). Numerous studies have highlighted peer relationships to be central to the sense of belonging for autistic students (Saggers et al. 2011; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Myles, 2017) and even loose ties within social groups can help autistic individuals to feel safe in their environment (Myles, 2017; May, 2013). Despite acknowledgement by their peers, there are suggestions that these students can often be on the periphery of social networks (Chamberlain et al, 2007) and some can find it difficult to reciprocate the skills and qualities they deem to be essential for successful friendships (Locke et al, 2010). Equally, autistic adolescents can be rejected and ostracized by their peers despites attempts to forge friendships (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008, Goodall, 2018a), which can lead to anxiety, isolation, and loneliness (O'Connor, 2016). Baumeister and Leary (1995) state that although positive interactions are preferable; to establish a belongingness it is most important that interactions are absent of negativity and conflict. Reynold (2017) also identified 'absence of negativity' as a key criteria for autistic students when identifying friends. Participants classified friendships by the absence of harmful interactions and reduced (but not removed) victimisation. Being ignored and excluded could

negatively impact autistic student's belongingness in the same way as being harassed (Reynold, 2017; Myles, 2017; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008).

2.2.2 Social Identity Theory

Belonging is often positioned as the extent to which individuals can be their authentic selves within a wider referent group (Mahar et al, 2013; Anant, 1967). Adolescence is commonly cited as time of identity formation (Davis, 2012) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes that individuals define their sense of self on groups they do and do not belong to. This divides the world into ingroups (us) and outgroups (them), with outgroup members being considered categorically different. People adopt the identity they associate with their ingroup and this can influence how an individual feels and how they think they should behave. Finally, people tend to compare their ingroups with other groups to evaluate their social status and thus their categorisation can impact on affect and self-esteem.

Individuals will be members of multiple groups depending on their attributes and social circumstances (gender, race, location). Intersectionality also means that membership to one group can impact on belongingness and identification in a completely different group depending on perceived importance and status (Settles & Buchanan, 2014). Identifying with multiple groups and multiple selves (self-complexity) can also be a protective factor if one aspect of an individual's identity is stigmatised (Jetten et al., 2012).

Group identification can change over time and across social contexts (Doosje et al, 2002), although this is influenced by *permeability* of group boundaries (i.e. can they access the same opportunities and resources as other groups), *stability* of groups and *legitimacy* of social status. If individuals perceive boundaries to be impermeable

(fixed group membership) and their group status to be low; this can lead to individuals being more likely to define themselves by their social demographic identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For example, autism is often referred to as a "hidden" disability, it is neurodevelopmental and lifelong, making membership impermeable. The theory therefore suggests that individuals may strongly identify with their autism-status if they feel this restricts their access to other groups and resources. In comparison, attending a specialist hub is permeable given the fluidity of the timetable and the active encouragement for students to spend increasing time in the wider school. Hogg et al (1995) argues that legitimately self-perceived low status, stable, groups which are permeable are less likely to adopt solidarity with one another (and thus a sense of belonging) than an impermeable group.

Many studies have highlighted that autistic individuals often compare themselves to their peers which can lead to negative beliefs and self-perceptions based on the stigmatising views of society (Stirk, 2011; Bagatell, 2007). Ruiz Calzada et al (2012) reported that some autistic young people held negative beliefs about their autism diagnosis and felt ashamed of this label. Comparably, some autistic students in Humphrey and Lewis' (2008) study referred to themselves as 'abnormal'.

This highlights the importance of school culture, ethos and diversity and the role of shared histories, beliefs and characteristics. An interpretative phenological analysis study by Stirk (2011) found that when autistic participants compared themselves to their autistic peers in specialist environments, their sense of belonging was enhanced. In contrast, self-peer comparisons made when participants transitioned into a mainstream school increased some students' sense of difference and belonging was demoted. A similar study by Croydon et al (2019) found the opposite

pattern, with autistic students noting a stronger sense of belonging in the mainstream environment and greater similarities between themselves and their peers.

Belonging is a reciprocal process (Mahar et al, 2013) and Habib and Ward's (2019) report that an individual cannot belong to a place without other people acknowledging that individual's position. As such, an individual does not only categorise themselves but will categorise others based on previous experiences, biases and context (Williams, et al, 1994). The imposition of these labels, particularly if they are negative, can result in the devaluation of a person's group membership (Turner, 1984). For example, even if a student does not identify as a "hub student" or an "autistic student", if this is how they are perceived by others it can impact on how they are treated (Laws et al, 2012). Therefore "*belonging can be as oppressive as it is enabling, something to be contested rather than simply inhabited*" (Nobel, 2019, pXViii).

When noting a sense of difference, individuals may try to distance themselves from their ingroup (individual mobility); redefine their group more positively (social creativity) or challenge the status quo (social competition). Camouflaging is one process some autistic individuals may employ to hide or mask their autistic traits via individual mobility (Livingston et al, 2019; Myles, 2017; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Although this can lead to increased "fitting in" and connectivity with others (Hull et al, 2017) it can also correlate with increased depression rates and lower feelings of acceptance (Cage et al, 2018). Brown (2018) positions 'fitting in' in polar distinction to 'belonging', noting that belonging should not involve changing who you are in order to be accepted or valued by others. Some students in Humphrey & Lewis' (2008) study were less concerned about fitting in and celebrated their uniqueness, demonstrating social creativity.

Critics of social identity theory argue that its centralisation on the motivating driver of self-esteem is both simplistic and restrictive (Abrams, 1992) in similar ways as the Belonging Hypothesis. Furthermore, whilst group similarity may result in classification to the same abstract and subjective label, this is not necessarily sufficient to create a sense of belonging without meaningful interactions between group members (Lewin, 1948). Nevertheless, social identity theory has been praised for both its psychological and sociological theorisations, incorporating socio-historical dimensions and their influence on ingroup relationships (Hogg et al, 1995). Despite this, research utilising this theory often focuses primarily on cognitive factors rather than contextual ones which ignores the dynamic element of the theory (Hogg et al, 1995). Political scientists also criticise the model for minimising the role played by history, culture and subjectivity (Huddy, 2001), thus a psychological sense of school membership offered in the next section aims to address these gaps.

2.2.3 A Psychological Sense of Community

Bennett (2012) denotes that community is closely related to belonging with references to both safe and comfortable relationships and environments. A psychological sense of community (PSOC) was initially introduced by Sarason (1974), who conceptualised the construct as the perception that one belongs to a larger group. It has also been argued that schools can be conceptualised as communities due to the existence of shared ethos, ideals, values and norms (Baker et al, 1997) although Pooley et al (2008) argue that they largely practice more as societies than communities. A key difference they identified was whether belonging focuses on the students adapting to the school or the school adapting to the students; arguing that belonging should not be studied as an individualised

characteristic and researchers should focus on the collective and holistic concept of community.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) propose that PSOC is composed of four elements: Membership, Influence, Fulfilment of Needs and Shared Emotional Connection. These closely align with conceptualisations in Part One of the literature review.

Membership is a sense of relatedness and belonging which comes from feeling accepted and invested as a group member. Group boundaries demark who belongs and who does not, and provide members with a sense of safety and security. This element encompasses shared rituals, languages and dress codes; intimate and trusting relationships with other members, and a personal investment within the group. Such an investment ensures that individuals feel they have earned their place, making membership more meaningful.

Influence relates to a sense of "mattering", making a difference and affecting change in ways similar to the value and respect described by Mahar et al (2013). This concept is bi-directional, with members mattering to the group and the group mattering to members. Influence needs to be carefully balanced, as conformity can silence individual thoughts and ideas (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Wehlage (1989) found that interventions aimed at increasing student's sense of ownership in school increased their commitment to school and reduced drop-out rates. McAllister and Hadjri (2013) agree that personal choice is essential in giving students a sense of ownership in their surroundings.

'Fulfilment of needs' relates not just to the individual having their basic survival needs met (e.g. safety, food, shelter etc) but all the emotional benefits derived from group membership. This is a key motivator and shared values and commonalities

can impact on group cohesion(McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Foster-Fishman et al (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of the critical factors involved in positive community development; and a strong emphasise was found on interpersonal value and respect. This was about considering an individual's qualities of being of worth. Goodall (2018b) also found that students wanted teachers to care about more than their academic results and show a genuine interest in them.

Finally, emotional connection links to high quality interactions and the notion that members have shared histories, shared spaces and similar experiences. The authors make reference to the "contact hypothesis" which states that the more opportunities there are for interactions, the closer group members will become. This is important because research suggests that autistic adolescents spend only a small percentage of their day with their classmates and the majority of time with school adults (Kuo et al., 2011). As well as proximity, 'spiritual bonds' (Bernard, 1973), positive and salient shared experiences (Myers, 1962) and public reward and recognition (Festinger, 1953) will all impact on this facet. This is also supported in the literature. Reynold (2017) conducted interviews with 34 autistic adolescents (70% male) about their friendships and emotional connection in school using a "Friends and Activities Questionnaire" and semi structured interview. This was then analysed via an exploratory qualitative analysis. She highlighted the perceived importance of similarity, proximity, transcending context, companionship, intimacy, support, trust, loyalty, and conflict management for her participants. This included a variety of positive experiences, such as sharing experiences and inside jokes and trust. However, the secondary basis of analysis meant data was not explicitly gained for this purpose and consequently research questions were not designed for a rich and detailed exploration of friendships. In contrast, Myles' (2017) qualitative study

highlighted that commonality with peers, such as sharing similar interests and values, provided a basis for conversation and promoted friendship development and maintenance for autistic girls. Spending time with peers was also important, and even comfortable silences promoted feelings of belongingness.

Nowell and Boyd (2010) criticise PSOC for a lack of clarity in definition and opaque theorisation which prevents rigorous scrutiny and evaluation. Kim and Kaplan (2004) also criticise the model for ignoring the important aspects of place, space, and the physical components of a community. Spaces are not merely places where interaction occurs, but are actant in identity formation and social oppression. Shilling (1991) argues that spaces do not only provide opportunities to act; they can equally constrain them. Even inclusive schools with hubs are internally partitioned, and thus space and place will continue to have an influence. Access to spaces within schools can therefore signal and direct certain types of behaviours and interactions; both of which can impact on an individual's SOB.

Part Three: Facilitators and Barriers to School Belonging

Allen and Bowles (2012) argue that less focus should be given to the conceptualising of belonging and more significance placed on the facilitators and barriers to this phenomena within schools in order to make meaningful change. Leck (2012) used photography to explore how SOSB was inhibited and facilitated for autistic male adolescents who did and did not attend an attached social-communication hub. SOSB was facilitated by the physical and social environment, effective learning conditions and whole school ethos. Leck (2012) linked these findings to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). This offers a framework which emphasises that school is just one of multiple systems which adolescents are a part of; alongside families, communities and friendship groups. These systems all interact

with one another, influencing each other and being influenced in turn. As such, SOSB is not an individual experience but affected by and affects classmates, families, staff and the physical space occupied (i.e. the microsystem); the school's ethos, policies, curriculum and culture and how this is shared and collaborated with others (i.e. the mesosystem); how these systems may indirectly impact upon one another via local authority policy, educational systems, and community (i.e. the exosystem); societal values, norms, and national policies relating to inclusion and autism (the macrosystem); and finally how this can change over time (the chronosystem – extended by Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Allen and Bowles (2012) argue that this framework "provides the most comprehensive theoretical construct to date with which to investigate belonging in an organisational setting such as a school" (p110). Although it is beyond the scope of this research to detail all the research into the education of autistic students, a summary of factors is provided below. These are also shown visually in Figure 2. Exosystemic and Macrosystemic factors have not been included in the prose as they have been discussed in section 1.2.2 and 1.3 of the introduction (national and local contexts).

2.3.1 Microsystem Factors
Microsystemic factors refer to influences within an individual's daily environment. As belonging is most commonly considered to be a social phenomenon, it can describe relationships in contexts of friendships, families, community and school. People and relationships have been constructed as a key influence on school belonging and community by numerous studies (Leck, 2012; Midgen et al, 2019; Wingspread Declaration on School Connections, 2003; Allen & Kern, 2017). Relationships with peers have been explored at length throughout this chapter. Relationships with
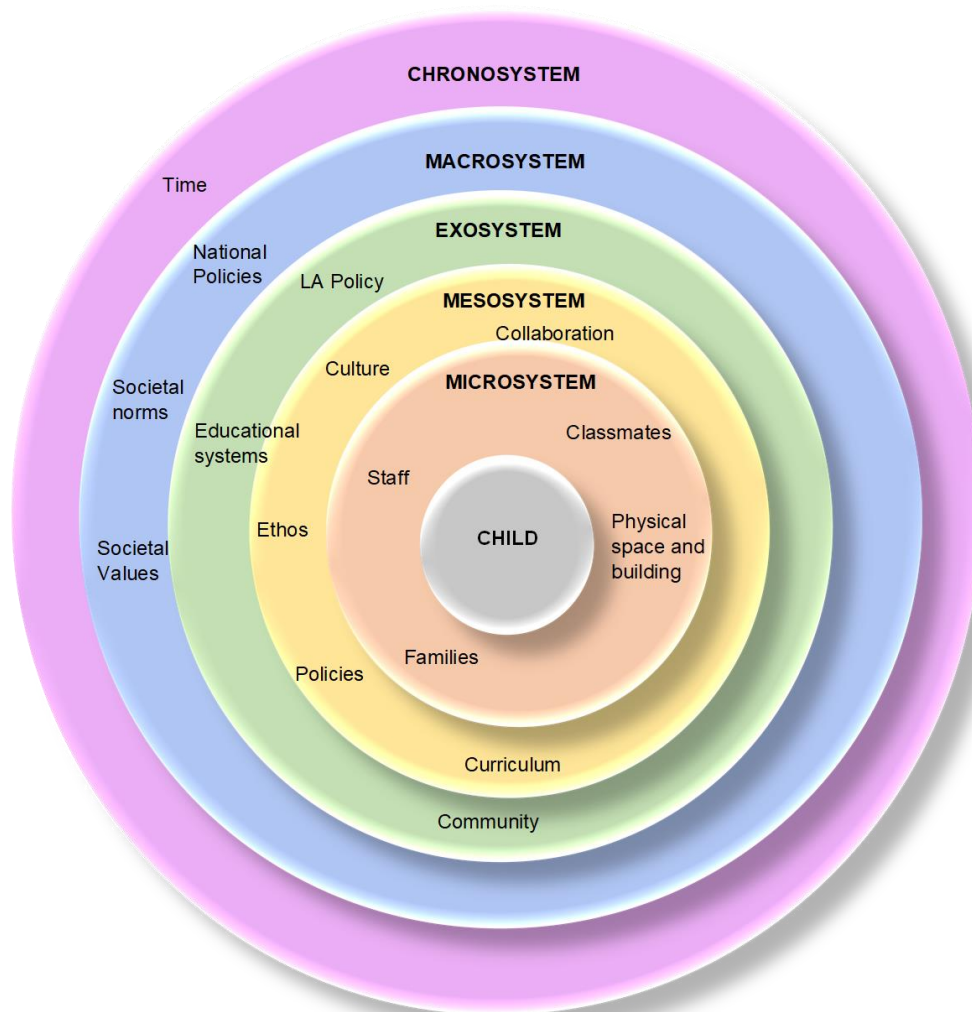
Figure 2: Factors impacting on school belonging adapted from Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) Bioecosystemic model

adults also play a vital role in schools; with *autistic students reporting greater experiences of belonging when supported by encouraging and understanding staff members with whom they have built caring and empathic relationships* (Myles, 2017; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Goodall, 2018b). Allen and Kern (2017) systematically reviewed 51 studies, on school belonging and found that teacher support had the strongest impact on a SOSB provided students felt cared for, fairly treated and supported in times of need. However, not all students will receive this support. Hayes (2014) found that mainstream teachers held significant negative perceptions relating

to their own capabilities of managing social, communication or behavioural issues which they associated with autism. They also felt they had insufficient time to work with autistic students whilst supporting the wider class; thus advocated for additional specialist TA support. These findings were echoed by the All Party Parliamentary Group On Autism (2017) who found that less than half of teachers they spoke with felt confident in supporting autistic learners. Students feel less understood when teachers lack understanding of their needs and cannot appropriately differentiate work (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). 60% of autistic students therefore felt school would be better if their teacher had a clearer understanding of them (All Party Parliamentary Group On Autism, 2017). However, Krieger et al (2018) also highlight the impact of over-supportive staff who can impede potential peer interactions and emphasise difference (Landor & Perepa, 2017). A careful balance of support therefore needs to be struck.

It is important to note that the responsibility for this does not solely lie with teaching staff and the wider school system, culture and leadership need to support them to achieve this, pragmatically, resourcefully and emotionally.

Belongingness also consists of a sense of place (Hay, 1998; Pooley et al, 2008); an area which has often been neglected in the conceptualisation to date. Pooley et al (2008) note that children often did not refer to places in their geographical sense, but in terms of the interactions that they promote. Robinson's (2014) participatory research into belonging with young people with SEND found that place was actant in relationship building and young people avoided places they felt unwelcome or unsafe. Kim and Kaplan (2004) highlight the significance of 'place attachment' to describe how individuals can feel at home in their community and how the built environment can impact group identity. The familiarity, interaction and knowledge of

the physical environment all contribute to place attachment (Tartaglia, 2006) and the amount of time spent in a place can create emotional bonds not only to the setting, but also to other community members (Sampson, 1988). The built environment can be comforting for autistic individuals amongst the unpredictability of the social world (Schofield et al, 2020). Krieger et al (2018) completed a thematic analysis on 31 studies relating to supportive environments which increased participation for autistic adolescents. Several aspects of the physical school environment (including the layout, location, and social spaces) were found to act as facilitators or barriers to effective belongingness and participation, in line with findings from wider research (e.g., Anderson et al, 2004; Waters et al., 2009; Morewood et al, 2011). They referred to the impact of sensory stimulation and unfamiliarity on participation for autistic individuals; and emphasised the importance of calmer and quieter spaces.

2.3.2 Mesosystem Factors

A school climate which makes students feel safe, valued and cared without the need to change themselves will promote SOSB (Pesonen et al, 2016 Allen and Kern, 2017, Allen et al, 2020; Pooley et al, 2008). This is systemic and all members of a school community (students, teachers; admin etc) play a role in maintaining the ethos by evaluating or abiding to rules and local culture. Allen et al (2020) argue that culture is shaped by school leadership and in turn shapes learning and behaviour. Leadership is also a key theme within the specialist-hub literature to ensure provisions remain well managed and inclusive (Bond and Hebron, 2016; Morewood et al, 2011).

Wingspread, (2004) highlight the importance of fair and consistent behavioural policy which are devised with all key stakeholders and enforced with predictability, which was supported by the autistic students in Leck's research (2012). Participants also noted that expectations should be aspirational, with appropriate academic

support being provided to all students to enable them to achieve. At the mesosystem, these aspirations need to be shared and constructed with family members to ensure they transcend the school environment. Riley et al (2020) also highlight consistency in respect to mutual understandings between students and adults, and the intentionality of purposeful and proactive interventions to support students to achieve belongingness.

Incidental changes throughout the school day can make school frightening for some autistic children, and Krieger et al (2018) construct the importance of predictability and consistency. Accessible information provided in advance of change can help young people to plan their inclusion and prepare themselves for participation.

Finally, a sense of safety in school has been identified as a key exosystemic factor (Pooley et al, 2008; Craggs and Kelly, 2018). Autistic students in Myles' (2017) thesis on school belonging also shared that factors such as the size of the school and the number of students impacted on their sense of safety. Wehlage (1989) found that teachers were unable to relate and personally connect with a very large group of students. This meant that students could receive less recognition for their talents, leading to disengagement and negative self-concepts that they were value-less. This created a vicious cycle and reduced motivation to engage in schooling. Wehlage (1989) argued that within smaller schools and groups, students could be seen as individuals and their talents could be celebrated. This led to feelings of acceptance, intimacy and care. Familiarity also plays a role in this, as well-known spaces can feel more secure (Miller, 2006).

2.3.3 Chronosystem Factors

May (2017) argues that "*Belonging is a fundamentally temporal experience that is anchored not only in place but also time*" (p1). History is built through memories

which involve places and relationships which we hold dear, and Peters et al (2016) argue that these can extend from early childhood right into the future.

Human development is "powerfully shaped by conditions and events occurring during the historical period through which the person lives'' (Bronfembrenner, 1999, p20). Our understanding of ourselves and our current environment is often derived through comparisons to past events, actions and relationships (Miller, 2006) which can affect our sense of belonging in the present (May, 2017). Riley (2017) highlights how students bring their own experiences and histories to school; and this is used alongside school practices to shape SOSB. As school communities are not material things but constructed concepts, they are always open to new and differing interpretation over time. Therefore, when students look back on their lived experiences within their school community (previous schools, previous social groups, previous year group etc) this can evoke feelings of affection or feelings of sadness and longing; highlighting the transient nature of belonging (Cuervo and Wyn, 2014).

Time was later incorporated into a bioecological systemic model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) to explain how this can not only influence development over an individual's lifetime but also have an influence inter-generationally over macrotime. This idea is especially prominent in family experiences of schooling, education and culture in what it means to belong. Räty (2007) argued that "*parents evaluative school recollections can be seen as one potential social-psychological factor in a chain through which meanings of education are transferred from one generation to the next*" (p388).

How autistic individuals have been positioned and recounted over time will also have a considerable impact on how they are perceived by others in the present. Narratives

and representation centred around abnormality and deficit persist to this day; citing autistic individuals as "unreachable" or in need of "cure" which can patronise, dehumanise and demean them (Thibault, 2014). Cultural changes in discussion around autism may therefore result in changes relating to acceptance and belongingness.

Part Four: Belonging in Specialist Hubs

As summarised in the previous section, a wealth of literature has explored practices which can facilitate inclusion and belonging for autistic students; although it is not always felt that this provision can be provided in mainstream settings (Connor, 2000; Goodall, 2018a). It has been suggested that the needs of these learners could be met via environmental changes and graduated provision, ranging from in-class support to designated units and specialist hubs (Warnock Report, 1978). In the latter, it is espoused that students can spend time in in mainstream lessons and socially be included alongside their peers, whilst also receiving specialist support and intervention (Ravet, 2011).

Whilst SOSB has been researched in mainstream settings, research conducted in specialist hubs are more sparse. Those which exist tend to centralise the perspectives of parents and professionals (Hebron & Bond, 2017; Bond & Hebron, 2016; Fredrickson et al, 2010), primary settings (Warren et al, 2020; Laws et al, 2012) or autistic females (Halsall, 2020).

2.4.1 *Friendships in Specialist Hubs*

The research to date has suggested that reciprocal friendships are a key protective factor to foster belongingness. The contact hypothesis highlights the role of proximity in fostering connections and friendships. It suggests that the more

opportunities there are for interactions, the closer group members will become.

Fredrickson, Jones and Lang (2010) interviewed staff members of schools with and without hub provision for autistic students to investigate the differences (representing 26 schools in total). They found that autistic students attending resourced schools spend less time in mainstream lessons than students in mainstream schools. However, the omission of student voice makes inferences about connection and friendships unattainable.

O'Hagan and Hebron (2017) interviewed three autistic students who attended a rural secondary school with a specialist autism hub; their parents and their keyworkers. They found that despite accessing mainstream lessons for the day's majority; participants did not identify any peer friendships outside of the hub. This suggests that being educated in the same classroom (social contact) was insufficient to foster sustainable friendships and feel understood, supporting Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory but not the contact hypothesis put forward by McMillan and Chavis, 1986. It also lends support to the notion that the quality of the interaction may need to be examined more closely than number of interactions (Locke et al, 2010). For example, Leck (2012) found that hub students were more likely to spend time with peers in work settings than social settings. Despite findings that mainstream students preferred socialising with autistic peers than working with them (Boutot and Bryant's, 2005), there appears to be less opportunities for this to occur.

Recent studies including autistic students suggest that they participate in 25% fewer cooperative interactions in school than their peers (Humphrey & Symes, 2011). Additional opportunities for meaningful extracurricular activities and interactions may therefore be required. However, students are often moved out of their local community to enable them to access hub provision; potentially further isolating them

from their local peer group and neighbourhoods (White, 2010). O'Hagan and Hebron (2017) highlighted how this can have a bigger impact in rural locations, as participating students in their study had to travel further than many of their peers, and this may have had an impact on the students' perceived ability to see friends outside of school.

2.4.2 *Group Membership and Identity in Specialist Hubs*

Ingroup membership has also been found to impact identity and belongingness, and Craggs and Kelly's (2018) meta-synthesis, constructed this theme as a way of conferring status and building connection with others. O'Hagan and Hebron (2017) found that attendance at the specialist hub was highly influential on the students' friendship development amongst other hub attendees. This may link to the principle of 'subjectivity' given that autistic students can feel better understood by their autistic peers than their non-autistic classmates (Macmillian et al, 2018). Equally, attendance at a hub may be othering (outgroup) and lead to increased peer rejection. This hypothesis is supported by Laws et al (2012) who investigated peer acceptance over time in a primary school with a social-communication hub. Peer acceptance was assessed through various sociometric measures, including asking children who they liked to play with. Teachers also completed communication and behavioural checklists for each child. Laws et al (2012) found that children were most likely to reject peers attending the hub, especially those with profiles indicative of autism. They surmised that social language and communication skills were more important to foster peer acceptance than classroom behaviour. Most importantly, when a student's principal placement changed from the hub to the mainstream classroom, peer rejection was reduced. This suggests that it is not just a student's social communication style or behaviour (associated with autism) which is othering, but

their physical location in school and what this may infer about group membership. Nevertheless, as the Children's Communication Checklist was not repeated, it is indeterminable whether this difference is due to relocation of students back to the mainstream class or whether the children's social communication behaviours had changed over time.

Other studies have shown more positive acceptance of hub membership, potentially emphasising the role of school ethos as a mitigating and protective factor. Warren et al (2020) used a storyboard methodology to explore the experiences of primary school students attending a specialist hub and their staff members. Students were excited about attending two settings within the school and felt positive about their different identity in relation to this. This allowed them to feel a sense of belonging within both settings.

Of note is that both Laws et al's (2012) and Warren et al's (2020) research took place in primary schools. Due to the nature of secondary schools, attendance at a hub may be less 'visible' as students move around and are with different peers for different lessons, making peer surveillance trickier. This may impact on social categorisation from peers. Equally, differences may become more apparent as students age and awareness increases. Parents of autistic children report that their confidence in effective inclusion reduces when their child starts secondary school (Barnard et al, 2000; Kasari et al., 1999) implying a different model in this context. The complexity of social groupings also increases in secondary school (Tobias, 2009), making the experiences of adolescents qualitatively different to younger children.

Research within secondary schools has suggested that inferred group membership may also impact on behaviour and spaces students access, with a participant in Leck's (2012) research commenting that the hub was good for when "they might not want to mix with normal people" (p71). This echoes the findings of Pesonen et al (2016) in regards to stigma, and the assertion that mainstream education is for 'normal' students and SEN provision is for students who are 'different'. Sansosti and Sansosti (2012) argue that only when their peers recognise the student as a classmate that they are truly included; and highlight the role of promoting this within the school ethos. Autism awareness may be one way of achieving this, however Fredrickson et al (2010) found that schools with an autism hub were less likely to provide autism awareness sessions for students than schools without this provision. The study debated whether disclosing diagnoses could disrespect student's rights to privacy and lead to misunderstood stereotypes. Given the hidden nature of autism, peers may not always categorise students in this way and may (correctly or incorrectly) attribute behaviours to other factors which could help or hinder peer acceptance. However, Landor and Perepa (2017) acknowledge that not disclosing a diagnosis can lead to informal labels amongst adolescents (e.g. "odd" "weird") which can be harmful and create further social barriers. Either outcome could be detrimental to autistic students' self-esteem when considering the formation of ingroups and outgroups.

Friendship interventions for autistic adolescents can typically focus on changing their social communication style (e.g. social skills training) rather than promoting inclusive attitudes amongst peers (Kalyva & Avramidis, 2015). Landor and Perepa (2017) investigated the practices in place to promote the social inclusion of autistic adolescents attending a hub provision. They interviewed 8 staff members and

received questionnaires back from 8 parents. Autistic students in the hub accessed a social skills programme, from which parents noticed positive impact. However, non-autistic students were not given any information or psychoeducation about autism. As the researchers did not seek the views of students, it is impossible to deduce whether their perceptions of stigma or peer acceptance changed as a result of the intervention.

2.4.3 *Whole School Ethos and Specialist Hubs*

Glazzard (2013) suggests that hub provisions may experience the same barriers to inclusion and belonging as mainstream schools. Although I agree with Ainscow (2020) that idealistically mainstream schools should be supported to promote their inclusive practices to negate the need for hub provision, such provision may act as a stepping stone to upskill staff and change attitudes at a whole school level. A reverse relationship is also possible and inclusive school settings may be more inclined to develop a specialist hub, resulting in a less inclusive setting overall. For example, Fredrickson, Jones and Lang (2010) found that, of the resource bases they studied, many employed autism friendly strategies (visual timetables, cues etc) within the base itself but such modifications rarely transcended to the wider school. This made many school environments less accessible to students. They concluded that inclusionary practice must be apparent on a whole school basis in order for environments to be considered inclusionary.

Hebron and Bond (2017) interviewed 9 pupils who attended a specialist hub, and 16 of their parents. Participants commented that the ethos and values of the wider school were just as important in ensuring students accessing the hub were fully included in school life; including all staff being autism-aware. Several students commented on how the inclusive provision offered a broad curriculum and this

minimised their feelings of difference as well as providing them with increased

academic and social opportunities. Parents and pupils felt attendance at the hub also

promoted inclusion in extracurricular activities, clubs and trips. This suggests that

siting a hub in a school can promote the development of whole school inclusion.

Given that this research was longitudinal (carried out over a 1 year period) it

incorporates the concept of time in establishing a sense of belonging.

Part Five: Focus of the Research

To date, much of the research into the educational experiences of autistic students

has centred on the perspectives of parents, teachers and professionals. Thus

understandings of belonging in these contexts are unrepresentative lenses of non-

autistic adults. This can be countered by exploring the perspectives of young people.

Thus, for me it was important to gain an insight into students' personal, lived,

educational experiences and how their sense-making influences their experiences of

belonging.

Carrington and Graham (2001) specifically comment on the experience of schooling

for autistic students, stating 'more qualitative research in the field of autism is

necessary to achieve an in-depth exploration of the real-life experiences of these

individuals from their own perspective' (2001, p. 47). Although Hebron and Bond

(2017), Leck (2012) and Warren et al (2020) have started this work in hub provision;

pupil views were combined with parental or staff views which may have minimised

the importance of their voice and centralised other informants. The methodologies

employed also did not allow for thick and rich descriptions and data collection

methods may have been less accessible for autistic students with social,

communication difficulties.

When pupils views have been appropriately sought, the focus has predominantly centred on what is going wrong in existing practice (Goodall, 2018a; 2018b; Tobias. 2009; Connor, 2000). Bogdan and Taylor (1990) argue that research into SEND has been saturated with critique and over-focuses on the "dark side". Such an approach provides educationalists with little support or guidance in how to adapt their practice accordingly as emphasis is on what not to do rather than what works well.

This research study adopts a semi-participatory and optimistic approach with a focus on highlighting existing positive practices which autistic students deem to be helpful. It is hoped that by doing so, we can broaden our understanding on if and how practices within a hub support autistic students and ways these can be replicated in broader settings. Equally, inclusive practices can revise the narratives around autism and challenge expectations for individuals to change as opposed to systems.

This study aims to answer two research questions:

- How do adolescents who access a social-communication hub make sense of their lived experiences in order to understand belonging in school?
- What practices within the school do they perceive to promote and facilitate their belonging?

The research questions demonstrate an interest in what it means to belong to a place (a school or a social communication hub) and what that experience looks like. I cannot research "belonging" as a concept in itself; only interpret how other people make sense of "belonging". Consequently, when I consider schools and specialist hubs, I am not only trying to understand how the students experience these places but also how students experience themselves as being in these places.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

It is suggested that researchers critically examine their beliefs, personal values, world views and assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge before undertaking research (Mertens, 2005, Finlay, 2006a) This is because such suppositions will impact on every decision that is made throughout the research journey.

I will begin by examining ontological and epistemological paradigms, and how this positionality led to an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. I will then outline the methodology and reflect on ethical considerations, participants, data collection and data analysis. Finally, I will consider the trustworthiness and quality of my research and the role of reflexivity. A summary of my research framework can be found in Table 4.

Table 4: Research Framework Summary

Ontological Stance	Critical realist
Epistemological Stance	Interpretivist
Theoretical Perspectives	Phenomenology
	Hermeneutics
	Idiography
Methodology	IPA
Research Design	Nested Case Study
Participants	Four students attending the hub provision
Data Collection	Semi structured interview
	Photo-elicitation interview

3.2 Research Philosophy

3.2.1 Ontology and Epistemology

As a discipline, psychology has historically been rooted in positivism, realism and quantitative approaches (Ponterotto, 2005). Positivism holds that truth and objective reality exists independent of thought (realist ontology) and can be measured and tested using facts, logic and scientific inquiry (Gray, 2014). This is due to the assumption that there is a direct relationship between concepts and our perception and understanding of them (Willig, 2013). The task of the positivist researcher is to describe and analyse reality and find universal laws that can be generalised separate to our own thoughts, values and beliefs (Khaldi, 2017). Ontologically, a realist qualitative researcher is interested in what is "truly" occurring in someone's life in order to develop explanatory accounts of social and psychological processes. Epistemologically, they believe that they can do so without influencing participants and without participants influencing them (Willig, 2013).

Thomas (2017) argues that positivism is not always applicable to social sciences; where complex social phenomena (such as lived experiences of belonging) cannot be reduced to simple causal explanations. Equally, positivism has been criticised for the implication that knowledge is free of context and is readily accessible, in a term called "naïve realism" (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

Alternative approaches to positivist research can be found in interpretivism (Bryman, 2012). Researchers adopting this paradigm argue that social research is subjective and is only understandable from the perspective of the individuals involved in the phenomena being studied. Reality can only be understood because humans socially construct the world and give it meaning (Bryman, 2012). Interpretivists purport that all social phenomena (including belonging) is ontologically subjective, observer-

relative, and only exists in that it is experienced by conscious agents (Searle, 2006). From this stance, it is believed that perception and experience is never a direct reflection of the environment, but rather it is mediated socially, historically, culturally and linguistically (Willig, 2013; Madill et al., 2000). Interpretivist research methods are thus concerned not with the experience itself, but how an individual talks about a particular experience within a particular context. This is supported by Tönnies and Cahnman (1971, p89) who argue that belonging '*only exists in so far as it is perceived, felt, imagined, thought, known, and willed*'.

Sayer (2000) suggests that for research in the fields of social science, such as educational psychology, critical realism can provide an alternative lens to positivism and interpretivism in their purest forms. Although I am accepting of an independent reality which exists without the consciousness of humanity; I also believe that within this research, belonging cannot be known without the interpretation of subjective human experience. It is not possible to remove ourselves, our thoughts or our meaning system from the world in order to find out how things "really" are. Individuals will all perceive and experience phenomenon uniquely and fluidly based on their beliefs and expectations (Finlay, 2006). Knowledge can therefore only ever be interpretative. Although critical realism shares the realist ambition to gain a better understanding of what is 'really' going on in the world, it also acknowledges that the data the researcher gathers may not provide direct access to this reality (Willig, 2013).

3.3 Methodology

3.3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is a qualitative methodology compatible with my critical realist epistemology (Reid et al., 2005) as it does not refute an objective reality; but postulates that reality

cannot be experienced in a void of human interpretation. Value is therefore placed on the interpretations made by both the participant and the researcher. This aligns with my ethical stance that people are the experts in their own personal and social worlds and thus their voice is equal to my own. IPA is concerned with the way that people make sense of their world and the experiences within it. It aims to find out in rich detail how people make sense of their lived experiences using phenomenology, hermeneutics and Idiography (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology refers to the philosophical approach of "being" and the intention to place meaning on experience (Heidegger, 1962). The ultimate aim of phenomenological research is to describe things as they appear in the concrete lives and experiences of people (Smith et al, 2009). Seamon (2013) notes how difficult this is given that normality typically goes unnoticed. He adopts Husserl's (1970) term "lifeworld" to describe the taken-for granted mode of living that "just happens" unquestionably. Husserl (1927) highlights the importance of the researcher identifying and bracketing off their past knowledge and assumptions in order to access other people's lifeworld; although both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty felt this was unattainable; advocating for a hermeneutical approach instead (Smith et al, 2009).

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. This field was developed by Heidegger (1962), who proposed that an individual's understanding of the world is based upon experience, assumption and preconceptions. As previously noted, Smith et al (2009) refer to the principle of reflexivity as a way of considering our biases and how they may impact on interpretations. In IPA, a dual interpretation occurs. The participant is asked to make sense of a phenomenon by interpreting it and communicating it to the researcher. The researcher then has to interpret what has been said using their own

experience and position it in the wider social, cultural and theoretical context. As a result of this, Smith et al (2009) suggest that IPA researchers can offer meaningful insights and interpretations which transcend the explicit narrative provided by participants. This "double hermeneutic" acknowledges potential discrepancies between the participant's words and the researcher's interpretation of those words and the complexity of attempting to make sense of somebody else's meaning making (Smith et al., 2009). Reflexivity is vital here in that non-autistic people (such as myself) may have difficulties in understanding the experiences of autistic individuals i.e. the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012).

Idiography focuses on the particular, i.e. specific individuals navigating specific events in their lives. Mahar et al (2013) found that a sense of belonging is an individual experience and unique in its perception. It is therefore my view that it needs to be explored and researched in an individual way. My primary interest does not relate to the nature of belonging per se, but with my individual students and their experiences and understanding of belonging. It is only once these have been examined in rich detail that analysis broadens to consider themes across individuals and shared experiences (Smith et al, 2009).

3.3.2 IPA with Autistic Students

Children have historically been conceptualised as passive objects as opposed to active and knowledgeable social agents (Morrow, 2008). My beliefs align with Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) who purport that children are experts in their own lives and can produce 'better' and 'more authentic' knowledge about their subjective experiences than adults. IPA is participant-led and collaborative which will give students a voice and hopefully try to equalise the balance of power.

Lopez and Willis (2004) suggest that IPA extends past individual experience by critically considering the influences of history, society and cultural factors. Autistic children are a group in society with whom research is often done to rather than with (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). MacLeod (2019) argues that psychological research with this population is often medicalised and resistant to inclusive participatory approaches. Moreover, understanding of autism is often positioned "*in terms of the ways in which behaviours influence the environment*" rather than "*in terms of the ways in which the environment affects the individual*" (p50). My conceptualisation of the bidirectional impact between place and the people who live and learn there should help to address this criticism.

MacLeod (2019) provides evidence that IPA is an effective inductive, participatory methodology to employ with autistic individuals to facilitate co-production. However, Willig (2013) criticised IPA for not recognising the role of language within the construction of experience and reality, and therefore the possible influence and limitation that language may incur on the data. This may have a considerable impact given that all my participants have social communication needs. Tuffour (2017) notes that experience is inherently intertwined with language given that sense-making occurs in the context of narratives and discourse. Therefore, both myself as the (novel) researcher and my participants (young adolescents with social communication needs) will need the requisite communication skills, reflective skills and self-awareness to thoroughly explore the nuances of such experiences. Nevertheless, a social justice lens could consider such an ideology as elitist if reserved only for those fluent and eloquent enough to participate; which is at odds with my equity and inclusion ideologies. My role will therefore be adapting the methodology to make it as inclusive and accessible as possible.

3.4 Method

<u>3.4.1 Participants and Recruitment</u>

Student participants attended a rural mainstream secondary school (Academy status) with a specialist social-communication hub (Local Authority Controlled). Although still funded by government, academies are independent from LAs and have increased control over how they spend their budgets, manage their curriculums and structure their school day. They still have to follow rules in relation to admissions, exams, exclusions and SEND (Gov.uk, 2022). In contrast, the hub is maintained by the LA who employs the staff, owns the buildings and determines admissions. Organisationally, this had historically led to tensions as to the 'ownership' of the hub and the responsibility over the students in attendance. At the time of the research, 533 students attended the Academy of whom sixteen students accessed the hub (15 males, 1 female). An EHCP was needed to access the hub and required formal placement via the Local Authority's Specialist Placement Panel. Students attending the hub followed a personalised curriculum and intervention timetable which involved spending time both in the hub and in the academy. The hub consisted of 4 classrooms, communal areas, kitchen facilities, intervention facilities, toilets, contained garden and separate entrance. Further details of the school, hub and processes can be found in Appendix E. This hub was selected as it was the most established hub in the LA and was being considered as a model for potential future hubs.

Purposive sampling was used to obtain the relatively homogeneous sample required for IPA research. Smith, et al (2009) suggest that the typical number of participants for a project utilising IPA is between three and six. They also note that it is more problematic to have too large a sample size than too small a sample size. The hub

manager identified six students who met the inclusion criteria, as shown in Table 5. Two students did not wish to take part in the research project, leaving four consenting participants. The two students who chose not to take part did not consider themselves as "hub" students; and spent their time almost exclusively in the wider school. This suggests that the role of school belonging (and the feeling that they did not belong to the hub) influenced the recruitment process. For example, Tajfel (1975) suggested that people may avoid or deny their belonging to a devalued group and instead associate themselves with a group of a higher social status. This may have been a critical limitation given the 'optimistic' focus of my research (Bogdan and Taylor, 1990) as I wanted to focus on those who did feel a strong sense of belonging to school.

Table 5. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	*Exclusion Criteria*
The social communication hub was the named provision on section I of the student's EHCP (Please see Appendix D for the criteria for specialist placement here)	Students who were Looked after by the Local Authority or on a Child Protection Plan.
The student had attended the provision for a minimum of 1 year (Initially this was 6 months but was extended so that the student had experienced the provision prior to Covid-19 related changes)	Students who may have experienced mental distress by participating in the research, as judged by the keyworker via conversations with the student, their parents and other relevant professionals.

The student had attended the provision throughout the Covid-19 restrictions. The student was in Year 8 – Year 11 .	Students with whom I had previously completed psychological or therapeutic work.

I considered also gathering staff views, but reflected that student's own understanding of their experiences were valid in their own right (Thomas and O'Kane, 1998). Nevertheless, keyworkers were consulted and provided with an information pack to ensure they were fully aware of the research demands and procedures and could adequately prepare the students in an individualised way (Appendix J).

3.4.2 Participant Details

Students chose their own pseudonyms to protect their identity. I collected limited contextual and demographic information, as referenced in Table 6. Further information on each participant can be found in their pen portraits (Please see Table 9).

Table 6. *Participants' demographic and contextual information.*

Pseudonym	Year	Sex	Ethnicity	ASC Diagnosis	Attendance at the School/ Hub (including 8 months in social bubbles)
Danny Devito	11	Male	White British	Yes	18 Months
Conran	11	Male	White British	Yes	20 Months
Aerial Assault Trooper	8	Male	White British	Yes	15 months

Mikey	8	Male	White British	Yes	15 months

The sample was not as homogenous as I intended in that two participants had transitioned directly to the school and hub from primary school (this was not their local-community secondary-school) and two participants had moved to the school and hub following a placement breakdown in their local school.

3.4.3 Data Collection

Participants were interviewed twice (approximately 2 weeks apart). All but one interview were conducted face-to-face. One interview was conducted through Microsoft Teams due to changes in school-visiting protocol in-line with the Covid-19 guidelines.

Given the participants age, social communication needs, and the complexity of "belonging", I was concerned that certain experiences may not come to light in traditional words-only interviews (Beresford et al., 2004). Howard et al (2019 p.1875) highlighted the need for "sensitive, creative and personalised ways of capturing experiences within the autistic community, particularly more visual methods". I took inspiration from the field of social geography, which has simultaneous interests in place, relationship and space and how this can impact on experiences such as belonging. Such methodologies also offer an ethical approach to working with marginalised groups (Hall, 2010).

After considering many alternative methods for data collection a photo-voice approach was chosen given my limited access to school spaces directly. To generate data, the participants were given a school iPad and encouraged to take photographs which illustrated their sense of belonging in school.

As a pilot interview was not possible, I utilised peer reflection and supervision to check the appropriateness of my methodology; although none of my colleagues were autistic or had accessed a specialist hub and thus would not have provided the same level of insight. Concerns were raised that the very abstract concept of belonging may still be very difficult to operationalise in visual format and not all perceptions linked to belonging can be directly associated with a visual counterpart. Ochs and Solomonhttps://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17567505.2020.1699638?needAccess=true - en0014 (2010) suggest autistic individuals prefer objective topics and thus may find it difficult to engage in my study without additional support and guidance. It was also acknowledged that students may not have access to the same places to photograph given that school spaces were being heavily adapted to meet current safety guidelines. This restricted students opportunities for photograph-taking and may have constrained their voice.

An introductory interview was therefore devised with a semi-structured format to support the conceptualisation of belonging with participants prior to photograph-taking. Semi-structured questioning allowed the interview to evolve and develop depending on the responses given (Coolican, 2004). I used a range of descriptive, comparative, evaluative and narrative questioning, as advised by Smith et al (2009) which were open ended (Please see Appendix K for the interview schedule and Appendix J for a description in the keyworker pack). Although questions were loosely based on previous literature, I was very conscious that they should not be leading and should help students come to their own conceptualisation of belonging. No predetermined definition of belonging was shared. I offered each student choice about how they would best like to complete this initial work (Lego, drawing, writing). Reid et al. (2018) concluded that such techniques can empower marginalised

groups; facilitate in-depth discussion; and strengthen the trustworthiness of findings as well as providing a springboard for discussion. I did not interpret the drawings or structures built, believing that they held no fixed meaning and instead acted as a vehicle for discussion. None of the participants chose the drawing, although three students engaged with the Lego. I also adopted a visual scaling tool "circle of belonging" (see Appendix L) as developed by Myles (2017) where students could place crosses on to determine what their sense of belonging was in different contexts within their education.

At the end of the first interview, participants were given a school iPad and encouraged to take 5-10 photographs of their lived experiences of belonging in school over the course of the following two weeks based on the conceptualisations they had shared in the first interview. They were instructed to take photographs of "what helps you feel like you belong in school" with a number of rules regarding what they could and could not take images of from a safeguarding perspective (See Appendix N). This followed ethical conversations with staff regarding whether other students would be allowed to feature in photographs. Mandleco (2013) recommended that participants engaging in photo-elicitation interviewing should seek the consent of people that they wished to include in photographs to be used within the research. Keyworkers were tasked with ensuring that all students featured were happy to be photographed. Although the photographs were discussed in the interview, I did not publish any photographs.

I also provided a structured form for students to help organise their thoughts about the photographs (or other objects they wished to bring) prior to the second interview (Please see Appendix O). None of the students chose to use this form.

During the second interview the photographs acted as a prompt; with students initially providing a description of the photograph and then talking about the feelings, memories and associations made from the photograph. This contrasts with typical research questions where participants comment on adult and researcher-centric perspectives (Woolhouse, 2017) and helped reduce my pre-suppositions and researcher-bias by allowing students to discuss the meaning of the photographs on their own terms (Harper, 2002). This is critical given that IPA asks for researchers to be highly aware of preconceptions and previous knowledge; and to try not to unconsciously lead participants to themes. Furthermore, having a clear purpose was thought to help to reduce social-communication demands and make students feel less pressured. The interview schedule can be found in Appendix P. Although language remained the "data" which was analysed, the photographs helped to elucidate novel information (Croghan et al, *2008*) and this approach has been noted as being a useful method in IPA research with autistic participants (King et al, 2017).

Interviews were held in private spaces within the school and students were invited to have their keyworker present with them if they so desired. None of the students wished to do so.

3.4.4 Critique of Methods

Smith et al (2009) argue that worthwhile and quality research hinges on rapport and trust; and thus I met up with the two younger participants prior to the interviewing to play games together and establish a relationship. This also provided an opportunity for students to ask any questions about the study and talk them through the research aims. Although this allowed me to build rapport, it also meant that some students wanted to play more games on our next meetings and asked to finish the interviews early so they had time to do so prior to their next school lesson. I reflected that

although this hastened the interview, the participants had generously given up their time to speak with me and thus I deemed it fair that this was not solely on my own terms and students could also shape what our time together would involve. Older students were also offered an introductory session but declined.

In my reflective diary (Extracts can be found in appendix S), I noted that many of my questions were too open for the students or were answered in a very literal sense (i.e. "What made you choose to take this photograph?" "You asked me to take photographs for this project" "Can you tell me more about that?" "No"). Furthermore; some students found the additional resources (Lego, colouring pencils) distracting as opposed to engaging. I had not sufficiently reflected on the skills required to build or draw, formulate ideas and talk about them at the same time; and this was too cognitively or socially demanding for some students and I had not sufficiently developed my skills as a researcher to help facilitate this.

As discussed, belonging is not a stable concept and its transient nature may result in change over time given relational factors such as age, social circumstances etc. This study was not longitudinal and participants only took photographs over the course of two weeks; which may have restricted the belonging principle of dynamism (Mahar et al, 2013). Students commented that they did not always have access to a camera to capture what they deemed to be important and some noted that photographs were all staged as opposed to naturally occurring events (due to time pressures and location restrictions due to the bubbles). Students were given opportunities to discuss photographs they would have taken if they could. I also asked direct questions about how belonging had changed for them over time and in different contexts.

Finally, I engaged with keyworkers to help support the project given my limited access. They may have prompted and supported students based on their own conceptualisations and lived experiences of belonging, resulting in a potential triple hermeneutic.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The project was approved by University of Birmingham's Ethical Review Process (see Appendix F for the Application for Ethical Review) and also followed ethical guidelines proposed by The British Psychological Society, Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2018) and Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014). However, I acknowledge that ethics is a dynamic and ongoing process (McLeod, 2003) which I considered at each step as I completed the project.

3.5.1 Informed consent and right to withdraw

Informed consent was sought at three levels (school, parent and pupil). A meeting was held with the hub manager and keyworkers to share information about the research and gain consent from the school. Keyworkers then discussed the research with students and shared the pupil and parent information letters (Appendices H and I) which outlined the study's purpose, methodology, student's right to withdraw and contact details. I asked keyworkers to make it clear that students were under no obligation to participate and their right to withdraw at any time.

Simons and Usher (2000) argued that consent is ongoing and has to be re-established on a continual basis. During the interview process, I provided students with cards to turn over to indicate whether or not they want to continue or take a break with no negative consequences. One participant did ask to withdraw following the first interview; but consented to data from their first interview to be included in the

study. Although under no obligation to provide a reason, the participant stated that he had already shared his views with me once, and did not see the purpose in meeting with me for a second time. It is possible that this aligned with his autism diagnosis and wanting a clear purpose for information sharing. The participant also shared that they did not wish to miss further lessons in the lead up to his GSCE examinations.

3.5.2 Protecting Participants from Harm

An optimistic focus aimed to reduce conversation relating to difficulties with SOSB and for focus to be on positive experiences within school. Keyworkers were available immediately after the interview if students wished to discuss anything we had spoken about with them. This risk of emotional distress was further minimised by my training in therapeutic approaches as part of my educational and child psychology doctorate.

3.6 Data Analysis

Each interview lasted between 30-60 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Although transcripts should focus on semantic meaning, I chose to still initially transcribe false starts, repetition and latches responses as they gave me a sense of how confident participants felt talking about the different topics.

No records were kept of the photographs, drawings or Lego sculptures. This also meant that students retained ownership over their drawings and photographs and aligns with Kress' (2005) view that the student narrative of a photograph is more meaningful than the image itself. Smith et al (2009) also note that it is possible to publish work that has used photo-elicitation and not include any example photographs. Nevertheless, Pyle (2013) argues that including quotations without the corresponding photograph can silence young people's accounts. On balance, I

decided that through my own research I would not disseminate the photographs but welcomed the students to share the photographs when I disseminated the research within the LA. The ethics of confidentiality trumped those of transparency.

Although there is no one prescribed method of applying IPA, Smith et al (2009) provide a step-by-step analytical framework which I utilised (see Table 7). My research diary shows that I felt a large sense of responsibility to represent the voice of students alongside the acknowledgement that I may have overlooked information that someone else (with different beliefs and life experiences) may have deemed more significant. I understand that other interpretations of the data are equally valid, and thus have been as transparent as possible through the use of an audit trail at each stage of analysis. I also used peer supervision to check my coding and themes were appropriate.

Table 7. Steps of IPA Analysis (Smith et al., 2009 p79-80)

Stage	Description
Reading and re-reading	Following verbatim transcription, I continually re-read the interview data and tried to immerse myself in it. For each student I recorded my initial reactions, thoughts and feelings (free and open coding) for bracketing in my research journal.
Initial noting	I re-coded the transcript on a line-by-line basis using descriptive, linguistic and conceptual commenting (Smith et al, 2009) – Please see Appendices M and Q.
Developing emergent themes	I focused on what I deemed important (objects of concern) and the meaning attached to these (experimental claims)

	from the initial coding and summarised and organised this into emergent themes – please see Appendix R.
Searching for connections across emergent themes	I looked for connections and clustered these together into super-ordinate themes; allowing me to highlight the most salient and important aspects each student shared with me.
Moving to the next case	I treated each case individually and tried to bracket off the analysis for each student. However, it is inevitable that I will have been influenced by what I had found and analysed in previous transcripts.
Looking for patterns across cases	I constructed connections across the cases, looking for similarities and differences between individuals and themes.

The process of constructing themes was very interesting, however I spent a great deal of time re-constructing and re-interpreting these as I engaged in cycles of reflexivity. As each transcript was analysed in turn, I noticed that the same concepts were themed very differently between participants due to the meaning I attached to their individual lived experience. Therefore, I found constructing the super-ordinate themes the most challenging aspect. My reflective diary (extracts can be found in appendix S),supported this process which ultimately led to the emotive super-ordinate themes presented. Overall, the process was extremely cyclical (!), inductive and iterative.

3.7 Quality Control

3.7.1 Trustworthiness

Qualitative research is evaluated and assessed differently to that of quantitative research; and there are several frameworks and criteria one can apply to do so. Yardley (2000) presents four principles to assess the quality of a qualitative research study; as summarised in Table 8. The importance and impact of the research will be explored in the discussion.

3.7.2 Reflexivity

Willig (2013) notes that all qualitative research is in some ways implicated by the researcher and this needs to be critically considered in IPA through the use of reflexivity. To develop self-awareness of the dynamics of research, including relationships with participants and wider social contexts, Finlay (2006b) advises researchers engage in reflexive practices. Ethically, this aimed to diminish my own views overshadowing or silencing the sense-making of my participants (Shaw, 2010).

Throughout the project, I tried to minimise and bracket off my presumed expertise and experiences through the use of participatory methodologies and reflexive journaling. I actively critiqued my initial responses and thoughts and how these might limit or influence my interpretation or understanding (Fox et al, 2007). For example, I have worked with autistic students in both specialist and mainstream settings and formed views based on my discussions with them concerning belonging. Furthermore, my experience as part of the autism diagnostic group means that I assume difficulties in certain areas which may not be the case for all autistic students. This is outlined in my researcher positionality (Section 1.5). I therefore actively attempted to disregard these presumptions and ask questions to

further my understanding as oppose to fulfilling my expectations. However, it is unlikely that I was completely neutral and these experiences will still have impacted my interpretations.

Table 8. Trustworthiness of the Research Project (Yardley, 2000)

Criteria	Actions Taken to Increase Trustworthiness	Limitations to Trustworthiness
Sensitivity to context	• The extensive reading of existing literature on this topic. • Purposeful sampling allowed me to explore the lived experiences of students in a very specific context (attending one social communication hub). • I built relationships with key staff members and worked alongside them to recruit participants and develop sensitive and appropriate methodologies. • I am passionate about representing this community and my previous life experiences (Please see Researcher Positionality) and	• Engaging with existing literature on school hubs specifically was difficult due to the lack of shared conceptualisation, terminology, and purpose of this provision; which may have limited my contextual awareness. • The research took place in the wider context of a global pandemic – changing the educative landscape significantly and undoubtedly impacting on sense of belonging. However, I did not ask any specific questions relating to Covid and thus may have ignored a huge contextual influence.

	current training has helped develop my skills in empathic listening and rapport building. Ethical considerations were also paramount to my research.	Despite attempts to minimise power dynamics, there will inevitably remain an imbalance of power when adults interview children and adolescents.
	• IPA is an approach that is sensitive to context as the interviewer asks open questions and responds appropriately to the interviewee's answers. I focused on convergence and divergence between participants' experiences by comparing case to case.	
	• I endeavoured to reduce power imbalances between myself and the participants through participatory approaches; jointly agreed and familiar venues; detailed information to prepare participants in advance of the	

	interview to enable them to give informed consent.	
Commitment and rigour	• Alternative approaches were critically considered (Please see Appendix G) and IPA deemed the most appropriate. • My methodologies promoted participation in creative ways; although may not have been as engaging as planned as no students opted to draw. Three participants utilised the Lego kit but appeared to find this a distraction. • Themes and interpretations were jointly explored during peer supervision sessions. • An appropriate sample was recruited that met the inclusion criteria. • Transcriptions were thorough and accurate (as shown in Appendix M)	• Due to the additional restrictions, I was unable to conduct a pilot interview to hone my questions and technique. • The third UK lockdown and resulting logistics meant I was unable to check my interpretations with participants as planned. On reflection, this may have been inappropriate given the transient nature of belonging. • I recognise that I am new to qualitative research and thus am still developing the knowledge, skills and awareness to complete IPA research and ask high quality questions.

| Transparency and coherence | • I have been transparent in the methodology and methods used within the project.

• I have explained my own position and biases clearly

• I have included a considerable number of verbatim quotes from the data, both embedded within this thesis and within Appendices to support the arguments I make and to carry through student voice. no quote is left to itself – it is embedded in the persons account and discussed with my interpretation. I also attempts to demonstrate both the individual's and the group's experience intertwining each person's account with the others.

• Pen portraits are provided | • Photographs are not included in the thesis which may silence young people's accounts (Pyle, 2013) and does not allow the reader to draw their own interpretations. |

	• Transcript exerts are provided in Appendices M and Q to demonstrate level of transcription	
Impact and importance	As discussed in the introduction and conclusion	As discussed in the introduction and conclusion

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the outcomes of the IPA of the interviews with the four participants. Firstly, I present the pen portraits of the students given the idiographic focus of IPA and the importance I place on representing individual voice. I will then go on to present the five super-ordinate themes I constructed across participants.

4.2 Participant Pen Portraits

Pen portraits have been described as a way of integrating participants into the presentation of qualitative research, to ensure participants are represented more centrally (King & Horrocks, 2010). They also incorporate a reflexive account of the research interactions. This aims to also help the reader contextualise the data and increase the transparency based on the holistic knowledge I have on the young people and my interpretations of this. Please see Table 9.

4.3 Overview of Themes

It would be artificial for me to separate out the themes of the two research questions at this stage, given that students presented their lived experiences within context. As such, phenomenological research asserts that multidimensional concepts such as "lived experiences of belonging" should be analysed holistically (Lewicka, 2010). Thus I explain my findings under the constructed themes and then go on to answer the research questions separately within the discussion. Figure 3 shows an overview of the findings.

When exploring practices which facilitate a SOSB, an eco-systemic nature of belonging was constructed in similar ways to Hebron and Bond's (2017) research. This shows a degree of wider and organisational awareness from the students.

Table 9: Pen Portraits of Participants

Danny	Danny was very articulate and gave rich accounts of his experiences. He had a keen interest in computers and technology. Danny had attended the hub since the beginning of Year 10 following a managed move from his mainstream secondary school. Although he felt that he had a good group of friends in his previous school, and some teachers understood him entirely, he did not feel they could offer him the help he needed. Danny now split his time equally between the hub and wider school. . He saw the interventions (art therapy, outdoor education etc) as an opportunity for escapism from the social and academic pressures of school. Danny also frequently reflected on the importance of complying to rules and doing as he is told as he could often get into trouble. Relationships were very important to Danny and he wanted to be understood, accepted, valued and listened to. Danny noted some feelings of loneliness and commented on how his peer group within the hub was diminishing. He evaluated support by how well teachers differentiated and individualised the curriculum for him, but also for how they got to know him as a person as opposed to just a student. Danny also commented on teachers' personal attributes and how this fostered connection. Danny brought 6 photographs with him to the interview. The two interviews lasted a total of 1 hour and 20 minutes.
Conran	Conran had attended the hub since the middle of Year 9 following a short period of time in a pupil referral unit. Conran found the initial transition difficult and he was unsure why he left his previous school (exclusion or managed

move) and whether or not he chose to attend the hub. He initially did not like coming to this school and his educational journey had been rocky. Conran felt his SOSB has got better over time; which he attributed to a change in his own attitude. Nevertheless, he indicated that his SOSB was higher in the hub than it had been in any other previous setting he attended, and a lot higher than the wider school. . Conran spent the majority of his time in the hub and only accessed one subject in the wider school. He was happy with this arrangement as he preferred working 1:1 or 1:2 with adults as he was less distracted and could focus on what was most important to him (getting good grades).

Conran did not feel he was always treated fairly in his previous school, but also developed negative self-concepts of being "naughty". He described himself as being very outgoing and sociable in this environment, but felt this contributed to conflict and arguments; impacting on his access to learning and overall grades. Since attending this school, Conran felt he was much quieter and more introverted. Conran considered school as a place to learn and tolerated attending, but didn't feel an emotional connection to school. He complied to rules and just got through each day.

Overall, Conran appeared to make sense of his SOSB by exploring the self, his attitudes, perceptions and motivations and how these have changed over time and context. This fluidity of his self-identity did seem to cause some internal conflict and Conran was very uncertain if and where he belonged.

	Conran completed one interview with me and did not wish to participate in the photography task. His interview lasted for 48 minutes.
Aerial	Aerial was a chatty individual who enjoyed board games, football and PlayStation. He liked small groups and quiet places. Aerial had attended the hub since beginning of Year 7 as it was felt by his parents that mainstream settings were not meeting all of his needs.
	For Aerial, belonging centred on feelings of safety and success. He felt he could relax in the hub as everybody there had been validated and approved as "safe" people and the familiarity and consistency of staff ensured he could access help should he need it. Aerial also reflected on how students in the hub shared his ASC diagnosis and felt reassured that they could therefore better understand him. However, he placed more value on his relationships with staff than with his peers and was unsure if he had any friends in school. As such, Aerial's photographs centred on places and spaces as opposed to people and relationships.
	Arial brought 12 photographs with him to the interview. The two interviews lasted a total of 1 hour and 21 minutes.
Mikey	Mikey has a keen interest in birds and teddies. He often spoke with me through the medium of a toy pigeon and this appeared to give him a degree of safety and control; although it was often a technique utilised when he found a question tricky to answer. I therefore used this as a gauge to modify my language, reword a question, or change the

topic if I felt Mikey was experiencing discomfort. Mikey enjoys nature, being creative, and the freeing feelings relating to large, open, outdoor spaces. He was especially fond of outdoor education and art therapy.

Family was a theme throughout Mikey's transcript and he regularly compared family activities and the feelings of belonging within this system to his experiences in school. Mikey had a very strong sense of belonging to all areas of his secondary school and had very good relationships with staff and other students. Although he felt nervous with new people, the small groups and familiarity allowed him to build up trust and be his authentic self. He felt he had gained the confidence to spend more and more time in the wider school and felt an equally strong connection with the wider school now as he did the hub.

Nevertheless, Mikey frequently referenced the fact he was no longer part of his local community and missed his old friends and teachers from primary school. However, his parents negative experiences of his community secondary school means that he would not have attended this setting regardless of the hub.

Mikey brought 8 photographs with him to the interview. During his discussion of these, it was apparent that the experiences, memories and interactions which took place were more important than the environments themselves. For example, many photographs were of empty spaces which prompted discussion of interactions which had occurred there (snowball fights, intimate discussions, games). The two interviews lasted a total of 1 hour and 47 minutes.

Figure 3: Overview of Themes

Feeling Safe and Calm

Wider Factors
Changes over Time and Space

Feeling Accepted

Feeling Understood, Supported & Valued

School Factors

Teaching and Learning
• Curriculum
• Individualised support and differentiation

Research Question 1 – How SOSB is Understood

Research Question 2 – Practices which promote SOSB

Relationships

With Staff
• Knowledge of and interest in students
• Personal attributes
• Consistency & predictability of relationship
• Recognition and appreciation

Individual
• Attitude and appraisal
• SLCN
• Personal contribution

With Peers
• Absence of Conflict
• Friendships

Social Grouping
• Familiarity
• Group size
• Contact time
• Commonalities

Covid-19

Spaces and Environment
• Sensory Environment
• Natural Environment
• Familiarity
• Facilities

Ethos and Philosophy
• Hub community
• Behaviour and discipline
• Therapeutic approaches
• Extra-curricular activities

Family factors and experiences

Experiences in previous placements

Feeling Accomplished

Feeling Connected

4.4 Superordinate Theme: Feeling Safe and calm

Table 10. Theme One: Feeling Safe and Calm

RQ1 Subthemes	Research Question 2 Facilitated by
Environmental: sanctuary for escapism	• **Spaces and Environment** – the natural environment, sensory environment, familiar spaces, facilities • **Wider factors** -Covid 19
Relational safety	• **Relationships with staff** – consistency and predictability • **Relationships with peers** - absence of conflict • **Social grouping** – group size, familiarity, contact time • **Ethos and Philosophy** – behaviour and disciplinary, therapeutic approaches

Feeling safe and calm in school was a recurrent theme amongst the students' interviews. This was central to their understanding of belonging, with Aerial elaborating

"Feeling safe. And not scared. And feeling like nothing bad is going to happen" *[A,Interview1]*

4.4.1 Sub Theme: Environmental: sanctuary for escapism

Several of the students mentioned that school could sometimes be an overwhelming place for them; and they enjoyed seeking out small, quiet spaces away to escape these pressures. This could be through accessing indoor or outdoor spaces. For some students, this related to sensory escapism and avoiding the busyness and noise of the dining hall or corridors.

Researcher: And what would be different then if you weren't coming down to the [hub] between lessons?

Danny: I would probably find it a lot harder as currently everyone is just cramped in the dinner hall. It would be too many people, too much sound. Just everything wouldn't be good for me.   *[D,Interview2,]*

Students discussed the temperature and quietness of the hub and contrasted this with less desirable areas of the wider school. In addition, escapism was about avoiding social demands and academic stresses. This was not about a preference for being alone, rather avoiding aversive and uncomfortable environments and re-establishing a sense of calm. One participant spoke about the anxiety he sometimes felt when unable to physically escape, such as during the taxi ride to school.

This subtheme echoes the work of several other researchers in the belonging literature who have highlighted the benefits of safe refuges within a school for autistic students, and how they provide a place of comfort, belonging and acceptance (Krieger et al, 2018, Mcallister and Hadjri, 2013; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Tobias, 2009). Landor and Perepa (2017) argue whether such a space could maintain and foster social exclusion; although these students positioned it as inclusionary given that it enabled them to re-enter their windows of tolerance (Siegel, 1999). Therefore although the hub was constructed as a sanctuary; it was not a space that all students wanted to remain on a full-time basis. Most students relished the stimulation provided by the wider school and thus positioned the hub as a supportive environment to enable their inclusion as opposed to an alternative to mainstream lessons. One student explained it as:

I don't think the [hub] is really a school. It's more of an add on to the school. {mainstream school] is the school and [hub] is just somewhere I go to feel comfortable sometimes   *[A,Interview2,]*

Alongside being a refuge, most participants felt that familiarity was an important environmental factor to make a place feel safe and comforting; and was a reoccurring theme when explaining photographs they had taken. Danny found the familiarity of his form room reassuring given that he was there in both educative and social contexts, and this helped him to "cope". Equally, over the lockdown period, Danny had accessed a different classroom in school and even though he did not have an emotional bond to this space, it was still important to him because it was familiar.

Outdoor spaces were frequently photographed and discussed. Aerial related these back to safety, highlighting the role of the fences in keeping everyone in their designated areas and "holding pens". This was likely heightened due to the context of Covid-19 and the dangers of crossing bubbles.

The tranquillity of outdoor spaces (outdoor education, the Astroturf and the top yard) were noted by most of the students and the role of nature in providing a calming and peaceful experience for them.

"You get to walk around more. It's big. You can hear birds from it. I like listening to them."   *[M,Interview2]*

Participants enjoyed when this was coupled with the therapeutic interventions on offer in school, including outdoor education and art therapy.

Aerial: It inspires creativity. Nature.

Researcher: And what does creativity mean to you then?

Aerial: Just thinking of something outside of your head   *[A,Interview2]*

And it's like a time to relax and not have to worry   *[D,Interview2]*

Finally, environmental safety also involved protection from harm through behaviour policies and designated space. Aerial highlighted the breakaway spaces within the hub as a safe space he could access when he was feeling confused or overwhelmed, but reflected how these areas weren't available to him when accessing the wider school.

I just feel it is a good place to regroup. Just take a minute out and regroup your brain.   *[A,Interview2]*

However, belonging-in-places is situation specific, and other students saw these spaces as less preventative and more reactive and disciplinary. Thus it is not necessarily the spaces themselves which are of importance, but what the spaces offer students in specific contexts and how they are perceived. This supports the views of Shilling (1991) who argued that 'students and teachers can use the same sort of educational space in many different ways' (p26). Although both students constructed these spaces as establishing and maintaining feelings of safety; the narratives behind this differed.

Danny: There are quite a few safe spaces here but they are mainly for when someone is misbehaving

Researcher: Okay. So can you tell me more about that?

Danny: The fights? Not the fights. The meltdowns I mean? Sometimes a student just has a bit of difficulty coping. It's often dealt with by staff getting them into safe space

areas, you normally only hear a tiny bit of it before its either settled or dealt with. They are able to sit down and think about things for a bit. There isn't anyone else there. It's a good place for them to cool down and sit for a while I'd say. [D, Interview1]

Danny seemed to be more attuned to the sensory basis of other's behaviours as opposed to a sense of conflict. I found it interesting that he initially positioned 'meltdowns' as fights; and overstimulation was regularly constructed as a behavioural issue throughout his interview. This may have reflected a cultural narrative or be Danny's own personal interpretation. I also reflected on power dynamics and whether Danny was influenced by my role as a researcher and psychologist and adjusted his language accordingly. The repetition of the term "dealt with" possibly constructs these meltdowns as problems to be solved, managed and fixed and students need to be taken away until they have self-regulated independently. Danny was reassured by this and felt this enabled him to stay safe. He appeared to distance himself from this behaviour, and used exclusive rather than inclusive pronouns to imply that he wasn't an individual who experienced these meltdowns; as described by the concept of individual mobility (Tajfel and Turner, 1979)

4.4.2 Sub Theme: Relational safety

Relational safety arose from consistent and predictable relationships, availability of support and familiar people. Danny noted that although the familiarity of space was extremely important to him, physical environments change based on who occupies these spaces. Thus safe spaces only remain safe if they are occupied by safe people

Researcher: What is it that makes the room good for you?

Danny: Well the room is constantly changing with people inside of it [D,Interview2,]

Danny named the key adults he interacted with inside the room and how familiar

relationships with these staff members were a key vehicle to make him feel secure.

They also all know me and I feel we can have a good laugh together so I feel like I

belong more because of how well we know each other you could say. I don't have to

worry about things going wrong with them   [D, Interview1,]

Aerial also considered the familiarity of peers and staff in the hub to be a protective

mechanism; especially given the small size of the group. Aerial explained this in

relation to one of his favourite video games (Medbay Among Us), noting a device

which scans everyone in the environment and pulls up their information which tells

him whether the players are "enemies" or "on his team". He described that hub

classmates and adults had already been pre-scanned and confirmed as safe people,

which allowed him to relax around them. Leary and Downs (1995) sociometer theory

puts forward a similar internal gauge which picks up on social cues to determine

social acceptance. However, autism is often characterised by difficulties in reading

and interpreting social cues (Happé and Fletcher-Watson, 2019). Thus for Aerial, he

is more reliant on learnt knowledge about his peer and staff group that comes from

previous encounters and familiarity. New people are seen as a threat as this

knowledge has not yet been acquired and so he cannot detect whether they pose a

danger to him. Smaller group size also meant that he could keep track of everyone

in his environment. He described being in larger groups as not feeling "right".

The themes of familiarity and safety were not restricted to the hub and transcended

to the wider school. Aerial identified the Main Reception as safe place given the

constant adult presence; offering him reassurance that this was an area he could always go to if he needed help.

Its someone always being there. I just know I'm in safe hands really. I can always find someone if I need them   [A,Interview2]

Several participants made reference to the school's behavioural policies and how these made the environment feel safe and predictable, as rules were consistently enforced. Equally, behaviour policies respected students and treated them fairly which may have been at odds with previous encounters some of the students had experienced.

I'd say a lot of people do respect him and so nobody really plays up in his lesson or anything. He's pretty good with how he punishes people. If someone talks, he's not going to start screaming at them and send them out.   [C,Interview1]

Mikey expressed that he felt safe in all areas of the school, which he attributed to the lack of bullies. He felt that this was a whole school ethos, and reminisced about projects such as anti-bullying week which endorsed this.

That's why I can't go to [local primary school]. There are bullies there. My dad was bullied there so it's not safe for me. That's why I came to this school. Everyone is nice and bullies aren't allowed.   [M,Interview1,]

An underlying dimension of this was the anticipation that conflict and negativity were to be expected, and there absence alone was sufficient in supporting students to feel safe. It was apparent that the narrative of secondary school being a dangerous place had been repeated to Mikey over time and reflected his parents' experiences of education. Mikey's safety needs were therefore met through lack of harassment as

opposed to the presence of friendship. In fact, absence of conflict was also a central component for all of Conran's relationships

Researcher: What do you like best about the school then?

Conran: I guess it's just the fact that I don't have anyone I sorta like I don't like them they don't like me. And I'm just neutral with everyone. No one is ever trying to wind me up or anything   *[C,Interview1]*

This may link to his previous experiences in his old secondary school, where Conran shared that he was constantly arguing with staff and peers. Unlike his classmates, Conran felt he needed to take responsibility for his own safety and did not want to rely on other people to keep him safe. He spoke about how he modifies his own behaviour and avoids any potential interactions as a way to escape potential confrontation.

4.5 Superordinate Theme: Feeling Accepted

Table 11: Theme Two: Feeling Accepted

Research Question 1 Subthemes	Research Question 2 Facilitated by
Accepted as an in-group member	• **Social Grouping** – commonality, contact time, familiarity
Accepted for Individual Identity	• **Individual factors** – attitude and appraisal • **Wider Factors** – Time and context, experiences in previous placements

I themed 'feeling accepted' to students' perceptions around their identities, ingroup memberships and how free they felt in expressing this without pressures to change.

Feeling accepted as a concept coincides with Anant (1967) definition of belonging as to the extent to which individuals can be themselves.

4.5.1 Sub Theme: Accepted as an Ingroup Member

Several participants reflected on their in-group membership of the hub and how the exclusivity ("*it's hard to get in here" – M,Interview1,*) gave them a sense of status in accessing this. Shared diagnosis offered some students feelings of commonality with others and provided a degree of identification whilst still remaining unique and individual.

[The hub] is mainly for people with autism like me… I just feel like I'm with people who are not the same but at least act the same as me.[A,Interview1,]

An autism diagnosis was only mentioned by two students, neither of whom knew what this meant. Danny did not note his autism diagnosis, but did reflect on feelings of abnormality. Feelings of ingroup loyalty could also lead to outgroup rivalry and the views that certain peers did not belong within the hub.

Danny: I *don't even know why they're here to be honest. They just seem like a normal person*

Researcher: Can you tell me a bit more about that? What do you mean?

Danny: This isn't exactly meant for normal people. It's made for people who need the help really.

Researcher: So what kind of person do you think would feel like they belong the most here?

Danny: Hmm. I'd say somebody who had difficulties in their last school and needed to adjust in order to do well in their future. I mean it's for us who struggle with learning   [D,Interview1,]

Thus, Danny's in-group identification was that he is a member of a community who needed to change in order to be accepted and succeed; aligning with previous literature findings (Myles, 2017; Cooper, 2019; Rogan, 2011).

Mikey's perspective and experiences were in stark contrast to this; and he felt no pressure to adjust or change his behaviour. Typically, many autism interventions can centre on modifying an individual's behaviours to help them to comply with the broader social expectations and contexts to minimise ostracization. Mikey reflected that he felt comfortable getting his teddy out in lessons and didn't have to hide his safe objects anywhere is school; although he was boundaried in this, demonstrating some awareness of social convention. He noted how his self-awareness sessions had helped facilitate this understanding.

Equally, this meant that when asked the same question (what kind of person do you think would feel like they belong the most here?); Mikey's response centred on wanting to share his positive in-group membership with his siblings.

Mikey - My brothers and sisters [would belong here the most]. It would fit them because they don't like bullies so they wouldn't want to go to another school. Plus it's fun here so I think they would like it. [M,Interview1]

Mikey's autism diagnosis does not define his presence in the hub, and it instead centred on feelings of enjoyment and safety.

Mikey: We've finally got a girl in the [hub] and we never had one in year 7. All the teachers were girls and all the students were boys. It's really weird

At home, Mikey had several sisters and was accustomed to socialising with both males and females. He appeared excited at the prospect of the hub diversifying and being more reflective of the wider school and home life. In general, in-group membership for Mikey rarely centred around the hub and predominantly centred around whole school membership. He frequently contrasted his school with other schools, especially his local mainstream school where the majority of his primary-school friends attended. Mikey asked me which school was better and it appeared that he was trying to ascertain legitimacy of his social status in relation to other groups; which theory suggests can help construct social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It may also have been the case that Mikey was concerned about his friends' safety, given the bullying narrative discussed earlier.

4.5.2 Sub Theme: Accepted for identity as an individual

Conran did not consider himself as a member of any group and identified as an individual. He compared himself across different times and contexts and how he performed different identities in different spaces, which Jetten et al. (2012) noted could be protective. Having his 'fresh start' at the hub enabled Conran to trial different ways of presenting himself

Conran: I was more sort of extroverted [in previous secondary school]. Just talking to people more but I dunno. A lot of people from primary went there and stuff. So I knew them and they knew me. I don't really sound that extrovert anymore. I'm an introvert now. I do talk to people. But not here. Not in school. I don't want to though. I do that with my friends.

Researcher: Okay. Can you tell me a bit more about how that has changed?

Conran: I guess it's like growing up really. I used to sort of like being the centre of attention and kinda but I just don't really care anymore. Umm I dunno. I just don't really think is kind of necessary anymore   *[C,Interview1]*

Conran: {To belong, what is important is] being a positive person and having a good attitude. Because I'm going to be honest. I don't really see myself as a completely positive person all the time…. They're quite outgoing. All the popular kids

[C,Interview1]

Conran had very rigid perceptions of who he needed to be in order to belong and be accepted in different spaces; and felt these were "necessary" but impossible to abide by. His complex transition process had made him question his identity and he was no longer sure how to present himself. Conran framed his introversion as a choice and felt it was due to maturity; although there was also a suggestion that Conran felt less comfortable in this environment as he didn't have long-lasting relationships from primary school. Conran described how previously it was important that he was noticed and known by others; but felt he had now moved on from this. I got the impression that he had become fatigued by trying to please others and this had impacted on his self-concept and led to feelings of apathy. However, later on in my reflexivity journal I noted that this could be reframed positively to the peace of solitude, and it may be my own values which had linked withdrawal to social indifference. Furthermore, Conran appeared unsure how safe it was to expose certain aspects of his identity (such as his more extroverted traits), as this had historically led to conflict. Solitude could therefore afford him this peace. For Conran, his identity was less about fitting in and more about getting through the school day so he could present as an alternative self in environments he felt were more comfortable and accepting for him. The behavioural constraints of school may also

be a barrier in his presenting his personality, in ways similar to the participant in Basel and Hamilton's (2019) research. Both Conran and the student in Basel and Hamilton's (2019) research conceptualised friendships as occurring outside of school and within school, it was important to lay low and stay off everybody's radar.

4.6 Superordinate Theme: Feeling Accomplished

Table 12: Theme Three: Feeling Accomplished

RQ1 Subthemes	Research Question 2 Facilitated by
Empowered and supported to achieve	• **Relationships with staff -** knowledge of and interest in students, personal attributes • **Teaching and Learning** – differentiation and tailored support • **Ethos and Philosophy**– therapeutic approaches, extracurricular activities • **Environment** – facilities • **Wider factors –** Covid 19
Recognition of effort and accomplishment	• **Teaching and Learning** – Curriculum • **Relationships with staff -** recognition and appreciation • **Ethos and Philosophy –** Reward systems

Success, both academic and extra-curricular, was important to students and they wanted to be supported to achieve. When they did so, it was salient that this success was recognised and celebrated.

4.6.1 Sub Theme: Empowered and Supported to Achieve

All of the students prided themselves on their academic skills and highlighted this in their interviews. Mikey was enthused by the breadth of curriculum subjects available and relished work that was challenging. Learning was also especially important to Conran.

Conran: And that's what you come to school for. To learn. So you don't want to be coming to school and not learning. It goes against the point. I just sort of wanna do the work. Do everything in school, do as I'm told and then go home. [C,I1,L406-407]

Researcher: What are the main things you are looking for out of school?

Conran: Definitely passing my GSCEs and getting a good grade in them. I don't really see myself failing them to be honest.   [C,Interview1]

In ways similar to the participant in Basel and Hamilton's study (2019), Conran appeared to reframe the potential difficulties he had in forming peer relationships into a positive opportunity to focus solely on the academic function of school rather than the social function. School was to be tolerated for its academic outcomes.

Mikey also felt the 'best' thing about school was his mainstream lessons noting "It's the complicated stuff that really interests me" . He realised the opportunities for growth and felt a sense of empowerment from these. Similarly, Aerial spoke about how he was able to be included in the 'daily mile' as "sir made it easier for me" and how familiarity with staff enabled him to ask for help when he required it.

Therapeutic interventions provided opportunities for students to demonstrate their skills (art, woodwork etc) and talk about their interests (anime, computing, birds) with practitioners they felt truly cared for their wellbeing. However, intervention sessions in the hub naturally impeded on time spent in mainstream lessons. This is important

as several students noted how the breadth of the curriculum and availability of subjects were extremely important to them. Thus a narrative emerged that 'missed' subjects are ones that students were incapable of achieving in.

Lessons in the [hub] replace things like Spanish. Basically things I wouldn't be good at for other reasons really. [A,Interview1]

Some students were more invested in their non-academic achievements. Aerial enthusiastically shared his excitement in winning at board games and saving a goal in football. His ambitions were to get on the radio for his trivia knowledge and to join the school football team; signalling the importance of extracurricular activities and involvement. This also shows that competencies and hobbies can provide further social opportunities and access to new peers.

Interestingly, facilities appeared to play a more important role for the students than relationships in several aspects of their skillsets. When asked what they would change about the school if they could, Danny immediately referred to the school's software system and his particular interests in this. This was not about relationships, but a solo activity which Danny took great pleasure in and was able to excel at (although misuse of this had led to exclusion in his previous school). Equally, Aerial referred to his interests in football; celebrating spaces such as the Astroturf where was able to play but wishing to change the 'hard' footballs which prevented him from playing his favourite position in goal. Although this is a social sport, Aerial's focus was on the game rather than the interactions. These functional responses suggest that students were not looking to change the quality or quantity of their relationships or interactions to further support their belonging; they were instead seeking to find ways to experience success and fulfilment relating to their skills and hobbies

4.6.2 Sub Theme: Recognition of Effort and Accomplishment

Conran was not seeking relational recognition for his academic work and felt only his GCSE results could validate his sense of competency. In contrast, two other students highlighted the role of the WOW wall; how staff recorded and recognised when targets were met; and how this relationship helped support a sense of competency.

Aerial: the WOW wall] just shows great achievement really. The teaching assistants take photographs of all the really good things students have done.

Researcher: And how did you feel when you got onto the wow wall?

Aerial: I actually felt really happy with myself because that means I've been getting my targets. I've got them a few times now. The photo was for my maths work though. I'm really good at that.   *[A,Interview1]*

This was not necessarily about just celebrating achievement but about staff caring about students and going out of their way to celebrate this in an individualised way. For example, Danny was extremely appreciative of the effort all the staff went to in organising a fish and chip lunch following his exams including a tablecloth, vase and waitress set up. This made him feel that staff empathised with him and valued his hard work.

Danny: The feeling of belonging definitely comes in here from me and my friend being treated well by the staff after doing something good. It definitely made me feel like we belonged. They thought about it and what we were going through and decided to reward us for all of it.   *[D,Interview1]*

4.7 Superordinate Theme: Feeling Understood, Supported and Valued

Table 13: Theme Four: Feeling Understood, supported and valued

Research Question 1 Subthemes	Research Question 2 Facilitated by
Emotionally Supported	• **Relationships** – friendships, relationship with staff, predictability and consistency • **Wider influences** – time and context
Understood and Supported as a Learner	• **Relationships** - Predictability and consistency, knowledge of and interest in students, personal attributes • **Teaching and Learning** – differentiation and tailored support • **Social grouping** – group size
Understood as a Person– I am more than just a student	• **Relationships** – relationships with staff

Some students linked their feelings of belonging in school to being understood by others and being supported and valued for the person they were. Although I felt this could overlap with my themes of connection, I reflected that connection may be a pre-requisite to accepting and seeking help and support.

4.7.1 Sub Theme: Emotionally Supported

Relationships with both staff and peers could provide emotional support and assist students when difficulties arose. They felt reassured in the knowledge that they would not have to tackle problems alone.

Having someone to talk to and confide in was essential for Danny, who considered friendships to be a pillar of support, mediating the difficulties of the school day. He

also constructed the reciprocity of this – with him equally being able to provide support to others.

Danny: The first thing about belonging I find is friendships is a big one

Researcher: So what is it about friendships which is important for belonging?

Danny: Because friends often make a situation a lot easier for you. In a way it's nice to have someone who can understand you… And who can be emotional support in a way too… If you're sad then they listen to you and hear you out. They help you when you're having a tough time and you help them when they're having a tough time. [D,Interview1]

In theory this was important to him, but in practice it was not necessarily being achieved.

Researcher: When do you feel like you have this?

Danny: In this school? Probably when.. I'm not sure really. [D1,Interview1]

For me, this reflected a longing for a deep, emotional, supportive friendship which wasn't currently available to Danny. He had shared this support was present with older peers, but they had now moved on and transitioned to further education.

Two participants spoke about the importance of trust within their friendships and how they could only confide in and speak to certain peers. However, for most of the students, friendships did not centre around emotional support; instead focusing on collective enjoyment, jokes and having fun together. Thus emotional support was primarily offered by and received from staff. All students included their support staff in their photographs for belonging and many referred to them as friends.

Danny identified three members of staff who he felt he could rely on to understand him – these included his keyworker in the hub and staff in the wider school

Danny: I can tell [my keyworker] some of my problems and she understands.

Danny: My biology teacher, my IT teacher. Those guys I definitely feel I can rely on if necessary.

Researcher: What can you rely on them for?

Danny: Just talking with them.   *[D,Interview2]*

For him, it was not problem solving he necessarily sought from staff but reassurance, understanding and containment or an opportunity for connection through a verbal exchange.

4.3.4.2 Sub Theme: Understood and Supported as a Learner

Participants also discussed the importance of teachers who understood them, had a personal connection with them, and provided interesting and motivating lessons. Some students felt that this differed between the hub and wider school.

Both the younger students commented on the connection and expertise of staff throughout the school, sharing their favourite subjects and emphasising the role of the teacher in challenging them but making learning accessible*.*

Danny reflected on what it meant to be "understood" from an academic perspective and highlighted the role of clear differentiation, small classes and individualised approaches to help him to achieve. He felt he was most likely to receive this in the hub due to the higher staff/pupil ratios.

its more productive as the teachers can focus on us two and with what we're struggling with instead of having to explain to the entire class something we had already figured out earlier on. So we are able to go ahead if necessary [D,Interview1]

Danny appeared to hold incongruent beliefs that he struggles with learning and needs more help, but equally that he is outperforming his mainstream peers who hold him back in lessons. I got the impression that the main barrier to mainstream participation was social as opposed to academic.

"they teach us separately. I find that a lot easier than being taught in a classroom full of people"   *[D,Interview1]*

Danny also acknowledged that skilled teachers in the school were able to provide him with this level of understanding and support provided they had built a personal connection with him; which he linked to their personal attributes. Although he was more likely to form a connection with a teacher who shared his interests and hobbies, Danny suggested that it is the person delivering the lesson who makes it enjoyable as opposed to the content. Equally, although Conran espoused that learning is the most important element of school, he too focused on his teacher's personal qualities and how they made him feel. The emotional and academic elements of support could not be separated out. If Conran did not have a consistent, predictable and intimate relationship with a staff member then he didn't feel able to complete work with them. He explained how staff absences and supply teachers impacted on his engagement, and his need for the intimacy of a 1:1 relationship to engage in more meaningful learning.

Conran: Teachers not being in a lot of the time. That definitely affects where I am [on the circle of belonging]

Researcher: So tell me more about not being in?

Conran: Like if it's quite frequently. If it's just a one off or for a week or so, I would be alright with that. But if it's like constant then that would definitely affect it. Because that was what was happening in {lesson] in Year 10. And that's why I just want to do 1:1. Because I couldn't cope with that   *[C,Interview1]*

4.7.3 Sub Theme: Understood as a person – I am more than just a student

Most of the students did not want to be defined solely by their academic output; and wanted to be holistically valued for who they are as human beings. This supports Mahar et al's (2013) theme of subjectivity, which focuses on an individual's unique perceptions of feeling important, valued and respected by the group system. Keyworkers were celebrated, as were several staff members in the wider school who had established relationships with students and students perceived them to have gone above and beyond to interact and get to know them.

Danny: He doesn't really mind what I talk about. He's always really interested in what I do which is always a nice thing in my opinion... He sees me as more than just exam material   *[D,Interview1]*

Danny's relationship with this teacher was based on personal connection which transcended an academic focus. As a result, Danny had formed an extremely close relationship with this staff member and felt closer to him than he did any of his peers, stating:

I think literally everyone likes him. He's probably one of the best people in school

                                                       [D,Interview1]

For Mikey, these factors had led to strong feelings of belonging in his previous school, which he still retained despite no longer being there.

Mikey: The reason why I was so iconic is because my school teachers and the headteacher and everybody liked me. They always remember the times we used to..like…everything we did. I think there is a picture of me somewhere in one of my teacher's offices. I went in for parents' evening one time and there was a picture of me. It's because they miss me.   *[M,Interview1]*

The fact Mikey was being remembered and held in high regard made him feel important and esteemed. Although this does not reflect his lived experiences of attending a hub; it shows how he conceptualises belongingness. Within his current setting, Mikey also shared that a member of staff had got to know him and his special interests, and had taken the time to crochet him a toy bird which was extremely dear to him. However interestingly, when probed about this relationship, Mikey acknowledged that the staff member was 'nice' but he did not feel he had a strong emotional connection to her and minimised her significance in his life. This demonstrates that despite best efforts to get to know pupils and support them in person-centred ways, students may naturally connect with some staff over others.

4.8 Superordinate Theme: Feeling Connected

Table 14: Theme Five: Feeling Connected

Research Question 1 Subthemes	Research Question 2 Facilitated by
Sense of Community within the hub	• **Relationships** – friendships, relationship with staff, predictability and consistency

	- **Social grouping** – group size, familiarity, proximity, commonality - **Ethos and Philosophy** – collective enjoyment - **Spaces and the environment** – facilities - **Individual factors** – personal contribution
Being known by others: *Acquaintanceship vs friendship*	- **Relationships** – friendships, relationship with peers - **Social grouping** – group size, familiarity, proximity, commonality - **Space and school environment** – facilities and activities. - **Individual factors** - SLCN
Dynamism: *Connected over time and space*	- **Wider Factors** – Time, Family
Feeling disconnected	- **Wider factors** – Local community, Time, Covid 19 - **Social Grouping** – Proximity, group size - **Individual factors** – SLCN, attitude and appraisal

'Feeling connected' encompasses a variety of relationships and how the students made sense of these across time, space and context. Although interpersonal relationships are deemed a central component in the belonging literature, not all students felt that friendships were important and their needs for connection and belonging were achieved through other means.

4.8.1 Sub Theme: Sense of community within the hub

Many of the students spoke about the sense of community they experienced within the hub and could not imagine their schooling without it. Communities share a history,

identity, discourse and obligations (McMillian and Chavis, 1986) and students shared information I constructed into emergent themes centring on collective enjoyment, feeling welcome, shared language, a sense of family, as well as just comfortably connecting with others. Aerial noted that he couldn't "bear the thought" of going to a school without the hub, and tensed his whole body up at the notion. Danny equally felt the hub was central to his belonging in school.

Researcher: Is there anything else you didn't take a photograph of because you didn't think it could really be captured in a photograph?

Danny: I'd just say the [hub] in general. It's a place for us to belong really. It really is.

[D,Interview2]

In support of the findings of Wehlage (1989) participants also shared that the small size of the group enabled people to get to know one another quickly and establish relationships. For Mikey, being well-known made him 'important'. However, it also enabled him to overcome his social anxiety and make friendships where he could be himself, interlinking with the themes of feeling accepted and feeling safe.

"You get to know them really well so you don't have to like .. with new people I tend to stutter and look away from them. I don't really focus on them. But with friends I can gain their trust and just be me.   *[M,Interview2]*

When describing the hub community, all students used inclusive language and pronouns – us, everyone, we. Danny made frequent reference to 'inside jokes', noting that 'everyone understands them' and highlighting the shared language and ethos of the environment. Danny continually compared the people within the hub to a family unit. He acknowledged that there can be love/hate relationships and fallouts due to

the amount of time spent together, just as there are for him at home, but ultimately this is overridden by caring relationships, love and support for one another.

School can't get [to a 1 on the scale] because it's not home. But it is as close to home as school can get…. everyone is good friends, all of the activities are good fun, and everyone often has a good time   *[D,Interview2]*

Students were keen to use their skillsets and competencies to support their community; and actively doing so could promote their SOSB. This linked to the themes of being valued and also to how students perceived their own identities and roles. For example, Mikey linked fixing machinery and electronics to his self-concept of being "helpful" and he positioned himself in line with other staff members; referring to this as his "job". For Danny, outdoor education not only gave him a sense of accomplishment from tracking his progress, but also served a collaborative and altruistic purpose in supporting the hub community. McMillian and Chavis (1986) noted how such contributions can make membership more meaningful.

Originally I couldn't even get a nail into a single piece of wood but now I can do it in like 10 hits. So I feel like I've improved a lot. We make things that will help everyone else. There's a shoe rack outside that we ended up having to make as the other one was too small   *[D,Interview2]*

However, it is interesting that Danny's language is less inclusive here (help everyone else versus help all of us), which leads me to question how he perceives himself in relation to the community. There is also an implication that there has been a degree of coercion and compliance as opposed to intrinsic motivation and desire to contribute.

4.8.2 Sub Theme: Being known by others: Acquaintanceship vs friendship

Students' reciprocal friendships with others were a firm basis for belonging within both the school and hub, and have been partially discussed in relation to various other themes. When asked about the most important photograph they had taken in relation to belonging, two of the three students highlighted a photograph of their friend.

Mikey: He's my friend and he's very important to me. I like him.... It's not easy to make friends for me anyway so. I used to have old friends in primary school but I did struggle with it. So I feel very happy that I have made such a good friend here.

[M,Interview2]

Like Mikey, several participants noted that their social-communication needs could impact on friendships and thus students who had successfully formed friendships in school valued these highly.

Within the hub, small group sizes, shared activities and regular contact were perceived to be supporting factors to help students to build and maintain these friendships. All students talked about the games and activities available during social times, although Danny felt these were limited and could become repetitive. Nevertheless, he noted that they can provide shared enjoyment which helps school to be "more tolerable". Bennet (2014) argues that repetitive activities and interactions support the formation of relationships, noting "belonging as a way of being-in-the-world is part of a mundane nature of everyday life" (p. 669). Activities also gave students something to focus on and centre conversation around.

I guess we just have a lot of things in common. A lot of the games we play, both of us play. So we can talk about them games and have conversations about them.

Several students noted that sharing common interests supported friendships and provided the basis for conversation; aligning with the literature (Reynold, 2017; Myles, 2017). However, this was not deemed essential.

Mikey: We don't have to have things in common. We can talk about different things. We don't really have much in common except for games. Just the games

Within the wider school, friendships appeared less important for students as they instead valued familiarity and acknowledgement. This links to idea that larger communities centre on mutual recognition and being known by others (Bennett, 2012, Craggs and Kelly, 2018). For these participants, this was more than just recognising faces, but actively knowing their peers' names and being known and recognised in return.

Mikey: [I belonged in my primary school] because I was one of the ones where everyone would immediately know my name when they came across me [Inteview1]

Conran: Cause I'd say if you fully belong to a school then you know everyone. And everyone knows you. What is important is them knowing my name. [Interview1]

Here, Mikey is evidently nostalgic for his primary school, which is an environment perhaps more conductive to mutual recognition and familiarity. Whether it is in fact possible to know "everybody" within a secondary school is redundant, although it is evident this is important in belonging to a group. Tönnies (2001) distinguished between knowing someone socially and knowing them generically; applying the term "Acquaintanceship" to conceptualise mutual recognition. He argued that this is a sufficient prerequisite for bonding and approval. However, like Mikey, Conran reflected on social-communication barriers with less familiar people and how this

could be a barrier to making friends. Although he had mutual recognition for people in his lessons, he reported that he didn't speak to anyone in this environment. This implies that although mutual recognition helped him feel comfortable, it was insufficient in promoting friendship development for him, supporting the findings of O'Hagan and Hebron (2017). Conran did acknowledge that he spends such little time in mainstream school, there are fewer opportunities for him to build these relationships; although noted this was not something he wished to do.

However, even though the students who spent long periods of time with their mainstream peers did form acquaintanceships, they did not form lasting and sustainable friendships.

Danny: I mean some of the students know me and call me out by name. There are two girls that I'm constantly sitting next to in all but one of my science classes they're sitting next to me. And they're so silly in a way that we can make some good jokes about it

Researcher: So would you consider them friends?

Danny: Maybe a tiny bit. I only really talk to them in the lessons. I'd say that they are nice people. They are often funny. They enjoy being with each other [Interview2]

Danny appreciated this sense of mutual recognition and this assisted him in feeling a degree of belonging in his lessons (as highlighted using the belonging circle to justify his ranking). However, Danny does not consider himself as part of the group and positions himself as being on the periphery of the interactions rather than centrally included. Given that Danny is uncertain about the nature of this relationship and the reciprocity, he does not attempt to extend it outside of lessons. He instead invests

time in existing relationships which he knows are reciprocated and prioritises the quality of a relationship over quantity.

I find it a lot easier just to stick with the friends I have. Because having a few good friends is a lot better than having a lot of "I just kind of know this man" kind of friends.

<div align="right">

[D,Interview1]
</div>

I got the impression that Danny could be boundaried in his friendships and they did not always transcend space. Danny shared that a peer he considered to be a friend in the taxi journey to school was not a friend he wished to socialise with inside the school. Equally, although during the lockdown Danny made friends with several mainstream peers with whom he was situated, they no longer spoke when restrictions were lifted. Danny therefore explained,

"they never were exactly my full on friends. They were just simply there." [Interview1]

4.3.5.3 Sub Theme: Dynamism: Connecting over time and space

All students mentioned wider contexts and systemic influences on their SOSB. This related to time, space and the role of the family.

Conran needed to have a sense of a longevity in order to establish belonging. This may link to his history being "kicked out" of his previous secondary school. If Conran did not see a future somewhere, he saw no value in forming connections

It's a temporary place that you go… so I didn't try to make that many friends there.

<div align="right">

[C,Interview1]
</div>

As previously discussed, being somewhere a long time also fosters feelings of familiarity, which are paramount for him. Being in Year 11, Conran was aware that

he had limited time left in school and wanted to focus his time and energy into academia as opposed to friendships which may not transcend into his future life.

I don't really talk to anyone or anything. I don't really want to though either. I just sort of wanna do the work…. I'm leaving school soon anyway. [C,Interview1]

In contrast, Danny was keen to maintain his established relationships after leaving school, and had been able to do this with peers in his previous secondary school.

Finally, Mikey's descriptions of SOSB were heavily impacted by his parents experiences, illustrating the role of macrotime across generations.

My mum didn't want me to go to [local secondary school] because she doesn't like [local secondary school]. She knows I wouldn't do good there. Because she didn't like it there either. And she went there and she didn't like it. She knew I wouldn't like it.   *[M,Interview1]*

Interestingly, this piqued Mikey's curiosity regarding his local community school and he asked lots of questions about it to try to confirm or refute what he had been told. I did get the sense that Mikey felt he was missing out in some way, stating "*What was it like there? Because I've not really been there. I don't even know what [local secondary school] looks like*." When sharing photographs of his key places within school, he asked for comparisons of whether the spaces and facilities were available in his local school. This highlights the role of family narrative on SOSB.

 The students reflected on how this was bidirectional, and how incidents at school could impact SOB at home and vice versa.

Researcher: What would a day you don't feel like you belong look like?

Danny: Start off with an argument with my mum. Go into school and often that causes me to get into an argument at school as well.   *[Interview1]*

4.3.5.4 Sub Theme: Feeling disconnected

Although this research takes an optimistic focus, I felt it would be remiss not to highlight some feelings of social loneliness that students reported, due to a diminished peer network, missing old friends and difficulties in forming new friends. Two of the participants referred back to previous circumstances where their circle of friends was considerably larger, suggesting that it was the constraints of the hub which were restraining friendships as opposed to individual factors.

When discussing friendships, Mikey rarely referred to his current friends in school and instead frequently reminisced about his friends from primary school.

Mikey: I had a few friends since like nursery and he's not in this school sadly. He's in [local secondary school]. Most of them went to [local secondary school]. I really wanted them to come to [secondary school] with me. They weren't able to come. It's too far to come here. I have to get a taxi

Researcher And how did that feel?

Mikey: Quite upsetting really because I miss my friends.   *[Interview1]*

Mikey often wondered aloud what his friends were doing now and he had a lot of unanswered questions. Attending the hub had taken Mikey away from his local community and his local friends with whom he no longer had contact (although Covid could have played a significant role in this). When asked about seeing previous friends, Mikey noted that although they live in the same town, they do not access the same spaces; highlighting the role of the wider community when considering inclusion and belonging.

Similarly, Danny reminisced about his larger friendship group in his previous secondary school; although he had been able to maintain contact with these peers. Danny was nervous about starting at the school but felt well supported by peers in the year above him. He was still experiencing a sense of loss at their departure due to the emotional bonds they had built; and Danny's social support network was diminishing.

But now they've gone and I can only play with [peer] which is sad [D,Interview1]

Danny further reflected on the role of proximity and how his friendships and relationships could centre around this. He felt that his time in school would be "*a lot more lonely*" if his hub peer was not with him; but equally shared that they do not spend time together in mainstream lessons "*sadly enough*". The phrase *I've no friends out there*" conjured up imagery of the wilderness as a simile for the wider school. He noted that other students rarely spoke with him (with the exception of the two highlighted in section 4.3.5.2); and although this is not the case within the hub, he only has the one consistent friend in this environment. This was further exacerbated by the small group size

I would like maybe one or two more people.   [D,Interview2]

In contrast to the others, Conran framed his disconnection to others as choice. Whereas Danny perceived other people needed to initiate the interaction, Conran felt autonomous in his choosing not to initiate. This different appraisal of the situation may have protected him from feelings of loneliness. Rodriguez et al (2020) argue that loneliness is a subjective perception and it is this appraisal which leads to poorer outcomes as opposed to isolation itself. Therefore, the fact that Conran

placed less importance on social connection in school may have been a protective

factor for him

I don't want to be completely involved in everything like events and clubs and stuff

like that. I don't have any interest in that [C,Interview1]

I don't want to seek social activity like that. I'm not trying to make lots of friends and

stuff. That's not important to me. I guess that's just my own choice. I know that a lot

of people probably do want to make friends but I'm fine with the friends that I have

outside of school. It's not like I'm always by myself. I do have some friends outside of

school. [C,Interview1]

Unlike his peers who framed the situation as other students not speaking to them,

Conran highlighted that he did not speak to other people and had no desire to do so.

Conran's social needs are met in other contexts (such as his online peers around the

world). Online, proximity is not an issue and thus Conran has a significantly larger

pool of friends to choose from in contrast to the limited pool of peers in school. He

therefore finds it easier to find the right fit and friends whom he has genuine

connections with and similarities.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.1 Answering the Research Questions

The aim of my discussion is to compare and embed my findings within the existing knowledge base, before providing a critique of my study and its implications for the future.

In answering my research questions, I mirror the aims highlighted within my literature review. My first research question was: How do adolescents who access a social-communication hub make sense of their lived experiences in order to understand belonging in school? This aimed to address the conceptualisation of belonging through the students' lived experiences. It therefore links to the knowledge base on how belonging is conceptualised (part one of the literature review) and its psychological underpinnings (part two of the literature review). I synthesise and discuss my findings through each psychological lens outlined in my literature review (the belonging hypothesis, social identity theory and a psychological sense of school membership).

My second research question was: What practices within the school do they perceive to promote their belonging? This focuses on facilitators of belonging, and therefore links to part three and four of my literature review (please see Table 2). I discuss my findings through a bioecological model lens (Bronfrenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

5.1.1 Research question one – How do secondary school students who access a social-communication hub make sense of their lived experiences in order to understand belonging in school.

SOSB was experienced uniquely and each participant shared an individual narrative about their experiences and impact on the self. They reflected on how their SOSB

changed over time and space with the formation and deterioration of relationships, changes of placement, expectation on the future and wider Covid-19 context. Nevertheless, some commonalities were constructed between participants and SOSB consisted of a place where students could feel accepted, safe, accomplished, connected to others, and understood, supported and valued. Students placed differing levels of importance on each of these themes, and this impacted on how they perceived facilities and support in place. These largely align with the conceptualisation provided by Craggs and Kelly (2018) who conceptualised SOSB to include positive social relationships; recognition, acceptance and understanding of individual identity; safety and security, and group membership. Their high order concept was *feeling safe to be yourself in and through relationships with others in the school setting" (Craggs and Kelly, 2018, p1411),* suggesting that for these participants how belonging was experienced comprised the same general themes as research with the non—autistic community. For the students in this study, relationships were similarly a vital component in their feeling accepted and safe; although some students placed equal importance on the physical environment, curriculum, wider school ethos and available facilities in meeting these needs.

Students affiliated the hub as a supportive mini-community within the school where they could escape everyday pressures and stress, be guaranteed safety and be surrounded by people whom they knew well and knew them in return. This had created strong reciprocal relationships and a predictive and supportive environment for some of them. Table 15 shows how these findings link to existing literature.

5.1.1.1 Understanding the findings through the lens of the belonging hypothesis

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that individuals have a fundamental need to belong and many of the participants echoed this sentiment. Conran did not feel this

applied to him within the school context, reporting that he had little need nor desire to belong within this environment given that his social needs are met outside of school. Belonging in other contexts can mitigate for a lack of belonging within schools. Equally, the reverse can be true and SOSB can act as a protective factor and reduce adolescents from seeking belonging in dangerous and antisocial ways (Kaestle, 2012; Sharkey et al, 2010). This suggests that a sense of belonging is fundamental, however there may be a role of self-determination, agency and choice in where this need is met with power dynamics and opportunities playing a key role. Finding safe and supportive places and people for adolescents to experience belongingness may be crucial.

Participants also agreed that social contact with others can be insufficient to meet the need to belong if they are not regular or meaningful. This was applicable in that proximity to mainstream classmates in lessons did not lead to reciprocal friendships outside of that context. For these participants, meaningful interactions could comprise of playing games together, discussing shared hobbies and interests or having key values and experiences in common. This aligns with Gottman's theory of friendship formation (Gottman, 1983) and the need for communication, information exchange, common-ground, self-disclosure and extending on each other's interests and activities. Some participants commented on the shared experiences and feelings of their fellow hub students and how this promoted a sense of connectedness and reciprocity (Mahar et al, 2013).

Next, Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that a minimum number of connections are necessary which need to be maintained over time. Danny felt that the limited size of the hub and the demographics of the pupils could limit the number of connections available to him. Many of the participants spoke of their sadness that their pre-

existing friendships could not be maintained due to attending a school outside their local catchment area (due to the availability of hub provision). Nevertheless, they felt that the hub had enabled them to make new friends and all friendships identified by students were fellow hub attendees. Connections with adults and staff within the hubs also helped to foster this. Within this domain, Baumeister and Leary (1995) further argue that social contact is insufficient should interactions not be meaningful, as was also noted by Danny who agreed that spending time with his mainstream peers did not create lasting connections. He only felt connected to peers whom he could confide in and interact with on a social level.

Finally, Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that interactions do not need to be explicitly positive but cannot be negative in order to promote SOSB. All of the participants noted that their school peers were never negative towards them, contributing to their sense of safety. For Conran specifically, relationships centred on the absence of negative interactions as opposed to the presence of positive interactions. This sentiment was echoed by some of the other students who noted "things not going wrong" as a key factor in their relationships which made them feel safe.

5.1.1.2 Understanding the findings through the lens of the social identity theory
Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposes that individuals define their sense of self on groups they do and do not belong to. Participants use of inclusive and comparative language eluded to their perceived in-and-out-groups; and reflected their whole school, school-houses, gender, hub status and autism diagnosis. One thing that made students feel accepted was having things in common with other people. This could relate to having similar hobbies and being able to share these interests openly; or being with other students with similar profiles of strengths and

needs. Attending the hub in itself definitely seemed to create ingroup membership, lending support to Shilling's (1991) belief that the spaces an individual occupies impacts on their sense of identity. It also provided groundedness (Mahar et al, 2013) as an external referent group to belong to.

Nevertheless, all of the participants also identified as being members of the wider school community and unlike previous studies (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Myles, 2017) did not feel they needed to act in a certain way to fit in there. Danny did compare the hub "ingroup" with the "whole school" outgroup as a means of evaluating his social status, noting associations of abnormality for hub attendance. This was not explicitly linked to his autism but rather on the need for academic help and support (in lieu of social, emotional or communicative support). Danny adopted a needs-based narrative; highlighting the difference between himself and his mainstream peers and the need for specialist pedagogy and teaching in order to help him.

 In contrast, neither of the younger students perceived themselves as any different to their wider peer group for attending the hub, echoing the findings of Warren's (2020) study. This was just another available space in school and part of their secondary experience. This may have been due to having no other secondary experience to compare this to or may have reflected their age and maturity levels, as these students seemed less aware of their differences. Moreover, unlike the females in Halsall's (2020) research, these male participants did not feel they needed to camouflage their behaviours or modify their specialist interests when interacting with others.

The permeability of group boundaries was discussed in relation to Covid-19 and the

role of group bubbles, which had restricted student's access to some of their social

opportunities within the wider school. Thus their access to other groups and the

related material and psychological outcomes, had been restricted to some extent as

a result of attending the Hub. This was not thought to be the case outside of the

context of Covid-19. Participants appeared to perceive their hub/whole school

membership as flexible, stable and legitimate.

Only two students explicitly referenced their ingroup identity as autistic, and this did

not appear to be a salient social identity for the young people. Goffman (1963) warns

of the dangers of individuals becoming defined by their condition, with this becoming

their 'master status' and overshadowing their achievements and accomplishments.

Thankfully, this was not the case for the students within my research. However,

studies also imply that group identification to an diagnostic label can relate to

positive identity construction (Punshon et al., 2009). This may avoid equally

stigmatising labels of abnormality (Landor and Perepa, 2017) as constructed by

Danny.

5.1.1.3 Understanding the findings through the lens of Community

Considering the research through the lens of community theory (McMillan and

Chavis, 1986) allowed me to reflect on this further, and I found this the most

applicable of the psychological theories explored. The notion of 'membership' was

met through the superordinate themes "feeling supported, understood and valued"

and "feeling accepted". Group boundaries were demarked by the physical space,

making it clear that all students within that space belonged with one another and

provided a sense of safety. Intimate and trusting relationships were also apparent in

this space. Students wanted staff to have a holistic appreciation of them, echoing

Goodall's (2018b) findings that autistic students wanted teachers to care about more than their academic results and show a genuine interest in them. What was most important was how attending school made students feel and whether they were valued and respected as individuals.

Students made a clear distinction between friendship and acquaintances. This can be related to theories of presented by Tonnies (2001, although initially presented in 1887). He theorised that 'acquaintanceship' is characterised as mutual recognition, which occurs when there is a necessity to share work, spaces, routines and customs. In the conceptualisation of environments that he named "Gesellschaft" (roughly translated at society), relationships can be characterised as a means to an end; people may spend time together peacefully but do not feel united to one another as relationships are formed due to circumstance and contractual obligation. Thus, a relationship would not endure when circumstances no longer promote these mutual activities.

Tonnies argued that 'friendships' form independently of this and highlighted the difference between knowing people generally and knowing them in an intimate social sense. Unlike acquaintanceships, friendships are based on mutual understanding and intimate knowledge of one another which create a sense of comfort and safety (Tonnies, 2001). This extends beyond physical characteristics, intellectual parity and behavioural norms and centres more on similarities in experience and values (Tonnies, 2001). This creates communities based on Gemeinschaft (roughly translated as community), comprising of intimate friendships between people who views relationships as an end in themselves and so actively work to maintain their bonds with others. This is aligns with what was deemed important to students in this research.

The fulfilment of needs was met through the superordinate theme "feeling safe and calm". Safety related not only to the physical environment, but also the relational environment through predictability, consistency and trust. This subtheme echoes the work of several other researchers in the belonging literature who have highlighted the benefits of safe refuges within a school for autistic students, and how they provide a place of comfort, belonging and acceptance (Krieger et al, 2018, Mcallister and Hadjri, 2013; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Tobias, 2009). Furman (1998) hypothesises that community cannot exist unless individual's needs for safety are met. Safety in school was increased by environmental factors (sensory considerate spaces, breakaway areas, familiar surroundings) and relational factors (small groups of familiar people, consistent support, absence of conflict and pre-existing relationships). Relational safety needs were met through the consistent and predictable availability of adults.

Feeling accomplished was important as students wanted their individual skills and talents to be recognised. Rewards for students sometimes centred on material or physical gains, but often related to praise, acknowledgment and thoughtful gestures. McMillian and Chavis (1986) also highlight how the capabilities of members can be effective reinforcers. The most predominant issue in relation to this was being able to engage in pursuits of interest and have a safe space to nurture their skills without the fear of humiliation or bullying.

The need for influence could be correlated with the superordinate theme "feeling accomplished". By contributing to the social, academic and physical school environment, some students did appear to achieve a sense of ownership which may have strengthened their commitment to school and their SOSB. Some students also

Table 15: How the Findings Fit In With The Existing Literature Base

MY THEMES AND FINDINGS	Mahar et al (2013) (Transdisciplinary definition of belonging)	McMillan and Chavis (1986) Psychological sense of school community	Craggs and Kelly (2018) (Metas-synthesis on school belonging)	Goodall (2018a) (Views of autistic students of school inclusion)	Myles (2017) (Autistic girls and school belonging)
FEELING SAFE AND CALM	N/A	• Fulfilment of Needs	• School Belonging and Safety/Security	• Feelings of Dread	• Safety
FEELING UNDERSTOOD, VALUED AND SUPPORTED	• Reciprocity (*Shared Feelings, Understandings and Experiences*) • Subjectivity (*Perceptions of Value and Respect*)	• Emotional Connection	• School Belonging and Knowledge, Understanding and Acceptance of Individual Identity	• Feeling Misunderstood • Feeling Unsupported	• Understanding • Opportunities to talk it through
FEELING ACCEPTED	• Groundedness (*Belonging to a Group or Place Where the Individual 'Fits*)	• Group Membership	• School Belonging and Experiences of In-Group Membership • School Belonging and Knowledge, Understanding and Acceptance of Individual Identity	• Feelings of Exclusion	• Social expectations
FEELING ACCOMPLISHED	• Subjectivity (*Perceptions of	• Influence	N/A	N/A	• Encouragement

FEELING CONNECTED	*Value and Respect)*				
	• Groundedness • Dynamism • Self-determination	• Emotional Connection • Group Membership	• School Belonging and Intersubjectivity • School Belonging and Experiences of In-Group Membership	• Feeling Isolated	• Friendships

alluded to the importance of conformity, following all the rules and doing as they were told in order to experience successful SOSB. Knowing others were doing the same helped them to feel safe, whilst also providing them with consistency, structure and routine.

Finally, the need for emotional connection was met through he superordinate theme "feeling connected". Belonging in school was often compared to belonging at home and with the family. Whereas some students felt a 'natural will' (Tönnies, 2001) to connect with others in this environment, others saw their relationships more as a means to an end. The students all highlighted the importance of the hub in promoting their SOSB and this was the place in school where they felt they could belong the most, aligning with Milton and Sim's (2016) findings on autistic-led spaces. Interpersonal value and respect were key, especially when effort was recognised and appropriate support offered.

5.1.2 Research question two – What practice in school do the students perceive to promote their SOSB.

A nested model was utilised to show how within-school and external practices could meet student's need to belong, as shown in figure 2. Within this section. I will describe the finding in relation to the Bioecosystemic Model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

5.1.2.1 Understanding the findings through the lens of the bioecosystemic model
Individual factors

Some students felt they had more control than others in their belongingness, and framed this as an active choice (Mahar et al, 2013) as opposed to a motivational driver (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1962). Conran repeatedly referenced

his own attitude and behaviours as being the main contributor to his SOSB. He felt much more in control of his interactions than other students, who reflected on their social differences and how this could impact on their confidence in approaching less familiar peers and engaging in conversations with them. Waiting for their peers to initiate was often felt to be fruitless. The literature suggests that autistic individuals often experience difficulties in initiating social interactions (Happé and Fletcher-Watson, 2019) and interventions often need to focus on both supporting autistic individuals in this skill development, as well as working with peers to equally initiate interactions (Locke et al, 2010). All the students valued education and understood its importance, potentially influencing motivation for engagement. Finally, students also referenced their own skills and talents and how they could contribute these to help the wider school community.

Microsystems

My research supports previous literature which highlights the importance of peer and staff relationships in SOSB (Midgen et al, 2019; Pesonen et al, 2016; Juvonen, 2006; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). This was central to many (but not all) of the students. Within the hub, the small size of the group meant that success and students' unique and special interests were recognised and celebrated in personal ways by adults. Small tasks could make students feel liked and wanted, such as displaying a photograph of them in the staff office (private space) as well as in public domains (WOW wall). Knowing that they were well liked by staff facilitated positive self-concepts for the students whilst having connections with others, recognition of strengths and needs and feeling mutual acceptance also transcended into the wider school, with students commenting on their positive relationships with skilled and supportive staff across various departments.

Peer relationships were also essential in meeting students' need to belong. For some, this meant being comfortable enough to have conversations together whilst others were seeking deep emotional support and connection. When these needs were not met, students reported experiences of loneliness. Within the hub, students felt safe to be themselves and some spoke about the commonality with peers which made them feel understood. The structure and consistency provided by games and activities created safety but equal social opportunities to have meaningful interactions (Kim and Kaplan, 2004) which may have otherwise been difficult due to autism. This is important as peer acceptance has been shown to make a significant contribution to SOB (Osterman, 2000).

However relationships amongst peers in the wider school, whilst not overtly negative, had not resulted in positive friendships. Students shared space with their peers but did not always participate in meaningful shared experiences that facilitated belonging. Thus, some students described being on the peripheral of interactions in this setting and no students felt they had developed sustained friendships with students who did not attend the hub. Non-negative interactions, lack of bullies and harassment and victimisation were still not enough to make students feel connected. This echoes the findings of O'Hagan and Hebron's (2017) and Myles (2017) regarding the importance of meaningful interaction as opposed to social contact.

Finally, the built environment was especially important in helping students to feel safe and secure, particularly familiarity and place attachment (Kim and Kaplan, 2004). The wider school was not always fully accessible due to sensory or social factors, and the hub was positioned as a temporary sanctuary away from this. Natural environments could also feel safe and calming. This aligns with research which suggests that spending time in and interacting with natural environments can

promote social cohesion and feelings of attachment (Peters et al, 2010). The biophilia hypothesis posits that humans are predisposed to connect with the natural world (Wilson, 1984). Gaines et al (2016) report that access to nature can help autistic individuals improve their well-being, reduce their stress and experience positive psychological emotions. Moreover, viewing nature can reduce pain associated with rejection and ostracism (Yang et al, 2020). Accessing nature has also been found to foster social interaction between young people (Bixler et al, 2002). However, only one of the students I interviewed linked their experiences in outdoor space to being with peers. For most, nature offered a degree of escapism and a chance for self-reflection or to connect with adults.

Students noted how microsystems interacted to impact on their belongingness between home and school. Hebron and Bond (2017) also found that attending the hub had positive effects on life at home. Partnership-working was key theme, emphasising the connection between home and school.

Mesosystem

An accessible, broad and engaging curriculum was important in supporting students to achieve and feel accomplished. This is in contrast to Wehlage (1989) who promoted depth of curriculum over breadth. Some students appreciated additional support to promote their inclusion in mainstream lessons, whilst others preferred the pace and individualisation they felt only achievable within the hub. Pesonen et al (2016) found that a lack of differentiation was a key barrier to SOSB and the students in this study felt that teachers could not understand them if they did not know how to modify learning content accordingly. Wehlage (1989) also advocates for specialist provision; arguing that this allows for a more personalised educational

experience for some students given the rigidity and size of some mainstream settings. However, it was the holistic, individualised approaches based on intimate knowledge of students that was most important, regardless of where this learning took place.

Extracurricular activities also supported students to pursue interests, interact with others and experience success, as identified by Midgen et al (2019). Life skills were prioritised, alongside introspective activities such as "self-awareness", which communicated to the students that there was more to them than their academic achievements and their personalities and characters were of value. This tied in with the overall ethos and philosophy of the school and its approaches to discipline, reward and therapeutic engagement. Pesonen et al (2016) found supportive school climates to be a key facilitator of SOSB.

Exosystemic Factors

Schools do not exist in a vacuum, and wider societal factors also inevitably had an impact on students' SOSB. Stories shared about school by others elicit natural comparisons and questions around the status of ingroups and school memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Students were also away from their pre-existing friendships and local community; which increased feelings of disconnection comparatively. Some students wished that the provision of the hub was available at their local schools, and that would truly be an integrated approach to inclusion given that they could have maintained these successful and positive relationships.

Macrosystemic Factors

The disruption of Covid-19 was also significant in impacting belonging in all areas of the students' lives. It was previously argued that to promote belonging in school

communities, meaningful extracurricular activities may need to be available elsewhere in a student's life. However, the students shared how they could no longer access: community spaces which had previously met their needs for belonging; extracurricular clubs and activities (e.g. football teams); certain family members or peers; and particular places in school. The emergent theme of the hub as a "sanctuary" reflected how trapped some students were feeling in their everyday lives.

Chronosystemic Factors

Riley (2017) states students bring their own experiences and histories to school and some of the pupils' experiences of exclusion and rejection in previous settings appear to have impacted on their behaviours and sense of identity. Equally, SOSB had changed over time for many students as the context, people and spaces around them had changed, confirming its transient nature (May, 2017; Cuervo and Wyn, 2014). An inter-generational influence was apparent for one pupil, whose SOSB was impacted by his parents' own experiences of belongingness when they attended school.

5.2 Unique Contribution and contribution to knowledge base

This research offers a unique contribution to the evidence base on SOSB. No other study to date has explored in rich detail the experiences of secondary-aged autistic students attending a Local Authority controlled hub, despite increasing numbers of students being placed in such a provision. I recognise that all hubs are uniquely different and operate in unique ways, so this study explores just one hub in detail.

Although the use of photovoice is not unique in the belonging literature, to my knowledge it has only once been utilised with autistic adolescents to help them to visualise practices which facilitate their SOSB (Leck, 2012). This methodology enabled

us to jointly construct recurrent themes from student perceptions; realising the "place" aspect of belonging which is often neglected. Although not longitudinal in nature, the interview schedule also allowed for an exploration of SOSB over time. Peters et al (2016) names the cornerstones of belonging as 'place', 'people' and 'time'; and inductive analysis naturally covered all of these aspects.

Furthermore, the unprecedented experiences of Covid-19 have also been acknowledged. Students were able to reflect on how their SOSB has changed over this confusing and unpredictable time; which may be especially important to autistic students who benefit from structure, routine and certainty.

5.3 Critique of the Study

Starting with my review of the literature, although I felt this was exhaustive and I read an extremely wide breadth of papers, the synonyms and varying conceptualisations of both belongingness and resourced provision makes it likely that key literature was missed. My research area was broad, and on reflection, I could have further refined my research questions to make my study more specific.

Interviews with students were relatively long, and each participant was interviewed twice to allow for further data collection and reflection between interviews. Participants were also able to share their conceptualisations in a number of ways, including Photovoice and Lego. New themes and topics were introduced in the second interview using the photographs, suggesting that a single interview may have not provided as rich a data set. This also may partially overcome criticism that IPA may be less appropriate for individuals with social communication or language needs due to the reliance on spoken word as a means of analysis (Willig, 2013).

Participants in my study were all white, British males. These attributes likely relate to a diagnostic bias towards white individuals (Troman et al, 2020) and males (Happé and Fletcher-Watson, 2019), although the LA the research was conducted in is not diverse. Although outdated, the 2011 census data suggest that non-white individuals account for just 2% of the population in the LA (Office for National statistics, 2016). When considering intersectionality, SOSB for autistic students from differing ethnic backgrounds may have elicited completely different themes and understandings and this may be an avenue for future research. Other research has already focused on the differences females experience when accessing social-communication resourced provision (Halsall, 2020; Myles, 2017). Within IPA, homogeneity of a sample is valued as was largely the case for my participants. However, socio-economic status can also impact on SOSB (Chiu et al, 2016) and no questions were asked or information gathered relating to this. Opportunity sampling may also have not been the most appropriate for optimistic research, and I could have utilised the psychological sense of school membership scale (Goodenow, 1993) to identify students who felt they belonged in school the most to understand what was working best for them.

IPA is interested in the specific, and thus the aim of the research was not on constructing generalisable findings. Nevertheless, by developing a rich understanding around a specific context (one secondary social-communication hub) theoretical transferability rather than empirical generalisability may be achieved (Smith et al, 2009). As many of the themes regarding the conceptualisation of belonging align with the existing knowledge base, they may hold true for a range of students. Furthermore, the within practice factors found to promote SOSB may be applied in less specialist provisions, promoting inclusion and SOSB across settings. I

fully acknowledge that the themes I have constructed will partially reflect my own biases and experiences, despite my use of bracketing and reflective journaling. Bracketing is considered ideal but not achievable practice, as the very nature of asking questions is subjective and based on my own experiences and assertions. I do not consider this a limitation but a reflection on the thesis. Providing students with an opportunity to review and feedback on the themes I constructed from their data may have provided further validity to the process (Yardley, 2017). However, the concept of dynamism (Mahar et al, 2013) meant that participants may not have related with what they had shared when revisited at a later date. I am also aware that a non-autistic researcher interpreting the lived experiences of the autistic community could lead to a double empathy problem, which may jeopardise my aim to raise the voices of students in a participatory way. Nevertheless, I feel appropriate methodologies were utilised which enabled me to be reflexive, step back, consider my role and "bracket off" some of my preconceptions and perceived expertise. Macleod (2019, p59) acknowledges that "*Where a non-autistic researcher is interviewing an autistic research participant about their lived experience in relation to autism, there is much to be gained from deeper exploration of this, potentially very specific, hermeneutic... The researcher uses their reflexive position to not just be aware of their positionality, but actively critique it, and in particular, critique the ways in which it might colour, limit or undermine the exchange.*"

Finally, this research was not focused on the views of parents, professionals or other school staff members. This meant that many organisational influences on belonging identified within the literature (the role of leadership, referral systems, staff responsibilities and expertise etc) were beyond the direct lived experiences and awareness of students, and thus were not included in their conceptualisations. This

is in line with my critical realist stance, as I was not necessarily seeking what was 'really' going on, but students perceptions and lived experiences of school. However, such operational processes may have an influence on who access hub provision, how provision is run and various other factors which will indirectly impact SOSB (Hebron & Bond, 2017).

5.4 Implications for Practice

Given the case-study approach adopted, this research may be most helpful for staff working in the school and hub it was conducted in. It may also be beneficial as an initial consideration for other schools in the area who are considering starting a hub provision.

As noted in the introduction, the rationale behind hubs is offering an integrated approach to inclusion, via specialist knowledge and expertise alongside inclusive social experiences (White, 2010). From my research, I understand that hubs are partially successful in achieving this and students were able to identify numerous supportive factors; many of which may be applicable to schools without an inclusive hub provision. Thus implications for practice partially hinge on how mainstream schools as well as hub provision can adopt and embed these accommodations.

Secondly, the research constructed that for some autistic students, inclusive social experiences were not actively sought nor wanted within the educational context. Thus, the role of the hub became about managing the tension between offering an inclusive ethos and understanding and meeting the needs of the students they serve.

These research findings have important implications for EP practice who act as key stakeholders in assessing strength and needs, advising on provision, devising

evidence-based intervention and supporting wellbeing and SOSB on a systemic level in schools.

Table 16 outlines some of the implications for practice in relation to the key findings of this research:

Table 16: Implications for Practice

Superordinate Theme	Implication for Practice
Feeling Safe and Calm	**At the school level** • Positively, students all felt the entire school was safe and they were not at risk of bullying, harassment or conflict. Narratives and identities around the hub were largely positive and it was well embedded to be considered practice as usual for most students. Thus, whole school ethos and philosophy is vital for successful inclusionary practice and to ensure a student's world is broadened by the hub rather than shrunk and confined to it. Whole school behavioural policies which are consistently applied also promote feelings of safety and accountability. • Exploring methods of building and maintaining relationships between class teachers and these students may be beneficial by adopting relational approaches and through the sharing of knowledge and good practice. Knowing key information about staff could help students feel safe, and thus it was proposed that staff developed their own 'one page profiles' (Sanderson, Smith and Wilson, 2010) which

	students could access, whilst normalising these person centred approaches. • The sensory environment plays a considerable role in students' feelings of safety and considerations need to made in relation to sensory considerations, the role of nature and familiarity. **At the organisational level** • Within both resource bases and mainstream settings, careful planning, design and architecture can support student's inclusion and belonging and this needs to be considered holistically.
Feeling Accepted	**At the school level** • Self-awareness sessions can focus on students' appraisals and how this can influence SOSB. The school may wish to critically explore how such sessions are utilised and the impact of these with support from the EPS. **At the organisational level** • Reflecting on the inclusion criteria to access the hub, students have "found a mainstream setting highly challenging (for example the child may have withdrawn from regular school attendance and/or have been excluded from a mainstream setting)". Although the aim of the study was not to look for comparisons between groups, a pattern did emerge. The Year 11 students who accessed the hub following school placement breakdowns associated their

attendance there with negative connotations in relation to their self-identity. This also meant that they started at the school in the middle of the academic year, when peer-groups were already established. Both students spoke at length about disconnection, although this was framed by one as choice. In contrast, the students who accessed the hub more preventatively (transitioned straight from Year 6 alongside their peers) held positive in-group identities and commented on how friendships were built from the start as the students were new. Although other factors could account for these differences, students frequently referenced social groupings (including feelings of commonality and proximity/contact time together) as means of increasing familiarity and building friendships. Thus, a possible implication from this study could include reviewing the hub inclusion criteria through the lens of school belongingness. Further research specifically into transitioning into a hub and SOSB would also be recommended.

For EPs

- During assessment work, EPs should be conscious of how the environment (both in school and in the wider world) fosters or demotes a student's SOSB and how this could be impacting on their presentation and engagement. Photography was shown to be an effective way of engaging

	students and eliciting information about their school experiences and this is a methodology I will adopt within my wider casework and practice. Supporting schools to also capture pupil views in inclusive and participatory ways will be a sustainable way to foster person-centredness and promote self-advocacy.
Feeling Accomplished	**At the school level** • Achievement and recognition were also key themes, highlighting the importance of praise, encouragement and personal bests. Students and staff members must maintain high expectations for students, whilst offering them appropriate support to meet these expectations. Understanding each student's personal motivators and interests will support with this.
Feeling Understood, Supported and Valued	**At the school level** • Meaningful differentiation was being achieved by many staff and students perceived these skills to mean that they were well understood. Without this, self-exclusionary behaviour was evident. Flexible and personal teaching approaches are important. • Therapeutic interventions were heralded not only for their interesting and enjoyable nature, but for the dedicated one-to-one time to talk with an adult and escape the stressors of school. Such interventions were the highlight of some

students' weeks due to the combination of intimate relationships, focus on accomplishment, skills and interests and the emotional support such provision entailed. Other settings may wish to consider how this could be utilised within their own contexts, if not through art therapy then through the use of emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs) or other specialists.

For EPs

- EPs are involved in training and can support schools in embedding and honing their existing skills in person-centred planning and differentiation. They can also work collaboratively with mainstream teachers using coaching or motivational interviewing approaches to support their competencies and confidence in meeting the needs of all learners, including those who also attend hub provision.

Feeling Connected	**At the school level** - Shared interests were identified as a reassuring basis for conversation, and extra-curricular activities and clubs may provide a key vehicle in creating opportunities for meaningful collaborative activities not only with students in the wider school, but possibly those within their local community schools. Multiagency Trusts are prominent within the LA and this may provide opportunities for cross-school working, clubs and networking to support pre-existing relationships from primary school as well as

nurturing the formation of new friendships. Nevertheless, choice and autonomy in not wanting these additional friendships was also mentioned – a decision which should be respected. This can be linked to students' individual strengths to further promote their positive self-image.

- Consistent home school liaison may help staff to understand how belonging in other contexts may impact of SOB in school.

At the organisational level

- Considerations need to be made in relation to the local offer and how students can remain connected and supported by their local communities; utilising existing protective relationships and friendships which have already been established.

5.5 Future Research

This research was initially interested in how students who access Hub provision experience a SOSB, although students' autistic identity has also been heavily considered throughout the thesis. To gain a clear understanding of what is distinctly and uniquely offered by the hub, it may be enlightening to explore the contrasting experiences of autistic students who attend the same school but do not access the hub provision. This may help clarify whole school practices, culture and ethos in comparison to the distinct value of the hub.

An alternative consideration relates to transition to the hub, given that some of the older students vocalised difficulties and lower SOSB during this time. This also reflects

wider research in transitions for autistic individuals which highlights barriers relating to change, uncertainty and unfamiliar environments (Neal and Frederickson, 2016). Adopting a longitudinal focus may support understanding of this complex process and how SOSB is fostered and changes over time within this new supportive environment. Research may also examine friendship maintenance and supports in place to promote this – particularly for transitions where resourced schools are also the local community school thus hub students transition with pre-existing friendship groups.

Finally, this project may benefit from repetition outside of the wider Covid-19 context where fewer limitations are in place.

5.6 Concluding comment

To conclude, this small-scale exploratory project has aimed to highlight the lived experiences of autistic students accessing hub provision and how this has impacted on their sense of belonging in school. It is hoped that by shedding light on their perspectives, good practice can be celebrated, extended and shared to enable adults to better support this population of learners.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Covid Impact Statement

Conducting research during the Covid-19 global pandemic impacted on my thesis in a number of ways, including:

- **Accessing Literature –** The majority of articles, journals and books I wished to access were available online. However, some were only accessible from the Library directly, which was closed due to the government guidelines.
- **Accessing Participants**. My research involved interviewing young people about their lived experiences. Due to visiting guidelines and school closures, I was considerably delayed in starting my research as I could not access my participants. It also restricted me from completing a pilot study. All initial interviews needed to be conducted on the same day (LA risk assessment allowed one school visit per week), limiting my opportunities for reflexivity and amendments between interviews
- **Methodologies** – My methodological approach changed as a result of the restrictions. Initially, a mosaic approach was proposed involving walking tours, joint map making and photography. Due to bubbles and social distance guidelines, walking tours and joint drawing exercises were not possible so only the photography element could be utilised.
- **Data Collection** – Place was initially a key cornerstone of my thesis. This had to be refocused given that students were severely restricted in the places and spaces they could access due to school bubbles. One of my interviews had to be completed via Microsoft Teams due to further school closures and visitor restrictions.
- **Lived Experiences** – Students' lived experiences of accessing a hub were significantly different due to safety policy and procedures in place. The hub was therefore not operating as it typically would be.

Appendix B: Systematic Search Strategy

Between September 2019 and June 2021, I completed systematic searches using the databases PROQUEST, EBSCO and Psych Info. (This timeframe was chosen given this is the time I was writing up my thesis - it was not the timeframe entered into the search)

The first search involved understanding how autistic students understand and conceptualise school belonging.

Inclusion criteria is noted below. 3 papers met the inclusion criteria

Population	Phenomena of Interest	Context
Autistic students	School belonging	Qualitative studies from 1969 onwards (On reflection – this could have been narrowed to post-2014 to reflect the new code of practice. Default settings were used)

Database	Search terms	Number of citations identified	Number removed due to duplication or not meeting inclusion criteria after screening titles and abstracts	Studies that met inclusion criteria	Name of papers
PsycINFO 1967 to present	(autis* or asperger* or ASD or ASC) AND (school belonging or school attachment or school connectedness or school bonding or school membership or school relatedness) AND (view or experience or perspective or perception)	4	3	1	• *Myles (2017) / Myles (2019) - The Social Experiences and Sense of Belonging in Adolescent Females with Autism in Mainstream School*
EBSCO		20	17	2	• *Goodall (2018)/ Goodall (2020) - . Inclusion Is a Feeling, Not a Place: A Qualitative Study Exploring Autistic Young People's Conceptualisations of Inclusion* • *Basel and Hamilton (2019) – Listening to the Voices of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder – "When You Are at School, You Have to Behave in a Certain Way"*

| ProQuest With " | (autis* or asperger* or ASD or ASC) AND ("school belonging" or "school attachment" or "school connectedness" or "school bonding" or "school membership" or "school relatedness") AND (view or experience or perspective or perception) | 14 | 14 | 0 | - |

The second search involved understanding the provision of specialist hubs for autistic students.

Cherry et al (2014) PiCo	Population	Phenomena of Interest	Context
	Autistic students	Specialist Hubs	Studies from 1969 onwards

Database searched	Search terms used	Number of citations identified	Number removed due to duplication or not meeting inclusion criteria after screening titles and abstracts	Studies that met inclusion criteria based on title and abstract	Studies that met inclusion criteria after being fully screened and were included in literature review
EBSCO	("resource* base" or "resource* provision" or "Resource* hub" or "resource* unit" or "special* base" or ""special* provision" or "special* hub" or "special* unit" or "inclusi*	69	62	7	O'Hagan and Hebron (2017) - Perceptions of friendship among adolescents with autism spectrum conditions in a mainstream high school resource provision

	base" or" or "inclusi* hub" or "inclusi* unit" or "focused base" or "focused unit" or "focused hub" or "SEN* unit" or "SEN* hub" or "SEN* base") AND ("educat*" or "school") AND ("ASD" or "ASC" or "autism" or "autistic spectrum condition" or "autistic spectrum disorder" or "communication" or "SCLN")				*Landor and Perepa (2017) - Do resource bases enable social inclusion of students with Asperger syndrome in a mainstream secondary school?:* *McAllister and Hadjri (2013)- Inclusion and the special educational needs (SEN) resource base in mainstream schools: physical factors to maximise effectiveness.* *Bond and Hebron (2016) - 'Developing mainstream resource provision for pupils with autism spectrum disorder: staff perceptions and satisfaction'* *Laws et al (2012) - Peer acceptance of children with language and communication impairments in a mainstream primary school: Associations with type of language difficulty, problem behaviours and a change in placement organization* *Frederickson, Jones and Lang (2010) - Inclusive Provision Options for Pupils on the Autistic Spectrum."* *Glazzard (2013) - 'Resourced provision: the impact of inclusive practices on a mainstream primary school'* *Boutot and Bryant (2005) - Social Integration of Students with Autism in Inclusive Settings*
PsycINFO 1967 to present	(resource base or specialist hub or resource provision or inclusion unit or focused provision or sen base or focused hub or resource unit or resource hub or specialist base)	*43*	*38*	*1*	*Warren et al (2020) Everyday experiences of inclusion in Primary resourced provision: the voices of autistic pupils and their teachers*

	and (education or school) and (autism or autistic or asperger)				
ProQuest	("resource* base" or "resource* provision" or "Resource* hub" or "resource* unit" or "special* base" or ""special* provision" or "special* hub" or "special* unit" or "inclusi* base" or" or "inclusi* hub" or "inclusi* unit" or "focused base" or "focused unit" or "focused hub" or "SEN* unit" or "SEN* hub" or "SEN* base") AND ("educat*" or "school") AND ("ASD" or "ASC" or "autism" or "autistic spectrum condition" or "autistic spectrum disorder" or "communication" or "SCLN")	273	200	8	*Hebron and Bond (2017) 'Developing mainstream resource provision for pupils with autism spectrum disorder: parent and pupils perceptions'* *Halsall (2020) - Camouflaging strategies used by girls with autism in specialist educational provisions: perspectives of girls, their parents and their educators* *Myles (2017) - Exploring the sense of belonging felt by adolescent females with autism in mainstream school : what can we learn about their social experiences?* *Mellon (2015) - A mixed methods study investigating a sense of belonging in young people with autism spectrum disorder in mainstream education* *Croydon et al (2019) - This is what we've always wanted': Perspectives on young autistic people's transition from special school to mainstream satellite classes* *Goodall (2015) - How do we create ASD-friendly schools? A dilemma of placement* *Ackerly (2017) - The views of young people with an autism spectrum disorder on their experience of transition to secondary school* *Goodall (2020) Inclusion is a feeling not a place*

Appendix C: Local Context and Government Data

	The LA	In England	Reflective Commentary
Students with an EHCP **(Shown as a percentage of all students attending educative contexts)**			
Percentage of students with an EHCP	3.3%	3.1%	The LA is broadly average in the number of EHCPs written to support students.
Percentage of students in mainstream secondary schools with an EHCP	2.7%	1.7%	More students in mainstream schools in LA have EHCPs than elsewhere. This could mean 1) Lower threshold for attaining an EHCP? Unlikely as percentage of students with an EHCP not considerably higher in LA than rest of England 2) Students being effectively included in mainstream schools 3) Less available specialist provision for students
Students whose primary need is identified as autism **(Shown as a percentage of students with an EHCP)**			
Percentage of students with an EHCP whose primary need is autism	3.1%	7.9%	Much fewer students in LA identified as having primary needs relating to autism. This could mean: 1) Lower diagnostic rates in LA. Ofsted written statement of action criticising lack of clear ASC diagnostic pathways. 2) Different categorisation and recoding of data. Students could be autistic but also have PMLD – PMLD categorisation prioritised. For example, the criteria at the hub is a primary need in "communication and interaction" rather than "autism". Thus needs may be decided based on political agendas. 3) Autistic students may be being supported and included

			successfully and not needing an EHCP
Percentage of secondary school aged students (attending mainstream or specialist provision) with an EHCP whose primary need is autism	8.2%	10.3%	By the time students reach secondary school there is less disparity between LA and England regarding primary need identified as autism. This could mean: 1) More diagnoses given to older students than younger students in the LA 2) Autistic students more likely to need an EHCP when they reach secondary school – increased demands in this environment and their needs are not met as effectively within nominal budgets.
Provision Type			
Percentage of students within special schools whose primary need is autism *(Shown as a percentage of all students who attend state-funded special schools)*	2.1%	29.8%	Specialist schools in LA cater predominantly for needs other than autism. This could mean: • Limited provision available for autistic learners - this population not catered for • Autistic learners needs being met in mainstream so no need to access specialist provision • Categorisation differences
Percentage of students with EHCPs placed in resourced provision (hubs) *(Shown as a percentage of all students with an EHCP)*	4.8%	9.6%	LA utilising hub provision less than rest of England What could be influencing this? Budgets? Strategy? Local needs?

Appendix D: Criteria to access the Secondary School Hub and Reflective Commentary

To obtain a placement in the hub, a referral needs to be made to the Specialist Placement Panel. This is attended by representatives from Education Access, SEND, Educational Psychology, Children Services and the specialist provisions within the LA, alongside the Virtual Head of School for Looked after Children. They discuss the information provided to the panel in regards to how mainstream schools have supported the student and followed professional advice from external agencies in-line with the assess-plan-do-review process. The criteria for accessing the hub is also considered and whether the student qualifies for placement.

Essential Criteria: The young person will:	*Reflective Commentary Notes (as quoted from my reflexive journal)*
- be of secondary school age (11 - 16) on admission to the hub - have a statement of educational needs or an EHCP - have special educational needs in the area of communication and interaction as the main area of difficulty - be able to access a mainstream curriculum, appropriate to their age, with or without support, but within the broad average range of ability or above - have found a mainstream setting highly challenging (for example the child may have withdrawn from regular school attendance and/or have been excluded from a mainstream setting) - require sustained support in order to develop and maintain peer relationships (i.e. will require explicit teaching or intervention from specialist staff on an ongoing basis) - require regular access to small group teaching and/or personalised support from specialist staff in order to access mainstream lessons	- Primary area of need is not "autism" but "communication and interaction". This links to my reflections on government statistics and categorisation (See appendix C) - How is ability defined and assessed? GCA should not be used to inform placement and can be misleading given the spikey profile often seen in autistic individuals. - The fact that students had to have already experienced an "unsuccessful" mainstream placement was interesting. I queried whether this could increase inclusion and SOSB by giving everyone an opportunity to experience a fully mainstream context rather than presuming incapability and placing them straight in a hub. Alternatively, I also reflected that students in the base may already have a lower SOSB if they feel they have experienced rejection from school via exclusions or managed moves. This led to questioning whether the hub should be used preventatively or reactively in fostering SOSB. - The importance and salience of friendship development is inherent in hub attendance. HOWEVER, expectation that

	friendship difficulties are due to SLCN alone, without wider consideration of how wider peer-group understand and relate to the students?
In addition, the young person may:	
• have sensory sensitivities requiring adaptations to their environment on a regular basis (for example, they may require access to a low arousal environment or there may be evidence that loud or unexpected noise causes considerable distress) • require a low distraction environment in order to sustain learning, including access to teaching outside the mainstream classroom for substantial periods of the day • have a diagnosis of an autistic spectrum condition (ASC) • require a highly structured daily routine • experience high levels of anxiety in a mainstream setting • have specific areas of strength or skill requiring access to a mainstream setting within a supportive environment	• The criteria does reflect the importance of place and how the environment needs to be changed to meet need. However, are these adaptations available throughout the wider school or just within the hub? • It is not essential that pupils have a diagnosis of ASC to access the provision. I like this because it prevents the diagnosis from becoming a gatekeeping process and is needs-led as opposed to diagnosis-led. I need to acknowledge that there will be students throughout school with an autism diagnosis who do not attend the hub. Thus, the characteristics which make my participants of unique interest is their attendance at the hub and not their ASC diagnosis, although this will be a relevant factor when making interpretations.

Appendix E: Further School Information

The hub was a maintained specialist resource base located on a mainstream secondary-school site (Academy status). At the time of the research, there were 16 pupils on roll (15 boys and 1 girl). Year 7 pupils accessing the hub tend to be taught in the resource base in small groups (4 pupils) with a trained teacher. Pupils in Year 8 -11 receive the majority of their teaching at the mainstream site with support from staff at the hub. Pupils could access the resource base for certain subjects (e.g. small group or 1:1 English or Maths), therapeutic interventions, targeted work (e.g. social skills) or as a safe base should the wider school environment become overwhelming. Each pupil has their own individual curriculum based on their interests, aspirations as well as curricula requirements. A nurture approach was adopted with access to art therapy, forest school and play therapy.

The hub consists of four classrooms (each with its own breakaway safe space), an intervention room, offices, a staff room, and an internal communal space. There is a large kitchen area which aims to promote life skills such as cooking. Throughout the environment there are a wide range of visuals to reinforce rules, resources and the structure of the day.

There is also a separate outdoor space with a range of play equipment including an air hockey table, small games pitch and bikes. The hub has its own entrance for pupils to use which allows them a quieter transition into school, as well as internal doors within the school.

The wider school had 533 pupils on roll. The percentage of students eligible to free school meals was 13.6%. It was rated Outstanding in the previous Ofsted Inspection.

Appendix F: Ethical Application for University of Birmingham

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Application for Ethics Review Form

Section 1: Basic Project Details

Project Title: Understanding school belonging in specialist hubs: The lived experiences of secondary-school pupils on the autism spectrum .

Is this project a:
University of Birmingham Staff Research project   ☐
University of Birmingham Postgraduate Research (PGR) Student project ☒
Other (Please specify below)   ☐

Details of the Principal Investigator or Lead Supervisor (for PGR student projects):
Title: Dr
First name: Julia
Last name: Howe
Position held: Academic and Professional Tutor
School/Department School of Education - Applied Educational and Child Psychology
Telephone: CENSORED
Email address: CENSORED

Details of any Co-Investigators or Co-Supervisors (for PGR student projects): N/A
Details of the student for PGR student projects:
Title: Mrs
First name: Emily
Last name: Williamson
Course of study: Applied Educational and Child Psychology Doctorate
Email address: CENSORED
Project start and end dates:
Estimated start date of project: 01/04/2020
Estimated end date of project: 12/06/2021

Funding:
Sources of funding: None

Section 2: Summary of Project

Purpose of the study and research questions

The purpose of this study is to contribute to an understanding of how secondary-school pupils on the autism spectrum and attending a specialist hub understand school belonging within their own lived experiences. The research questions are:

- How do secondary school students who access an ASD specialist hub understand and experience school belonging?
- How do practices in the resource base [and wider school] facilitate belonging for such pupils?

My proposed research is strengths-based, aiming to highlight how resource bases have fostered a sense of belonging and how this can be further developed.

Background Rationale

Inclusion is a widely debated topic, particularly in education. In recent years, there has been an international policy shift towards inclusion (1994 Salamanca Agreement) and it is now considered a matter of social justice. This is emphasised by SEND Code of Practice (2014) which states a child with SEND **MUST** be educated in mainstream school unless incompatible with parental wishes or efficient education of other children. However, pupils on the autism spectrum are frequently viewed as more difficult to effectively include than pupils with other special educational needs (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2006). Brooks (2014) found that difficulties primarily centred around the challenges of meeting the needs of cognitively able children whose ASD impacts on their ability to cope in mainstream schools. Their secondary experiences were particularly influenced by their social vulnerability and feelings of difference. Research attributes this to inappropriate school environments, negative relationships with peers and teachers, and limited understanding of, and support for, their specific needs (Sproston et al, 2017). As such, exclusion rates are twenty times higher for autistic than non-autistic pupils.

Educators struggle to identify what type of placement is best for pupils on the autism spectrum (Jones, 2008) and the review by the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2006) found that over 50% of parents of children on the autism spectrum were unhappy about the current educational placement of their child. It has been suggested that a spectrum of need should be met by a spectrum of provision rather than the limited options of mainstream vs specialist schools (Harvey, 2011). A popular solution in many local authorities is the building of resource bases (also known as specialist hubs, as they will be referred to throughout the rest of this document). These are specialist hubs attached to mainstream schools and portrayed as providing inclusive experiences with specialist tailored support. Parental views of inclusive placements are consistently more positive where there is an ASD specialist hub in the school (Lindsay et al, 2016).

Nevertheless, few studies exist exploring the educational experiences of young people on the autism spectrum and their views on inclusion. As a result, inclusion in this context is predominantly understood through the unrepresentative lenses of neurotypical adults. We can counter this be exploring the perspectives of children and young people about what it means to them to be included via their day to day experiences. No research to date has examined the rich descriptions of 'lived experiences' of pupils attending specialist hubs.

Goodall (2018) worked with autistic adolescents to explore their definitions of inclusion. They defined inclusion as belonging, being valued and wanted as a person by teachers, of fairness and of being afforded the necessary support to access and thrive in education. Goodall summarised that inclusion is a feeling (a sense of belonging), not a place (mainstream or specialist). Prince and Hadwin (2013) argue that a sense of

school belonging is fundamental to understanding the effectiveness of educational inclusion for pupils with SEN. Belonging is also is linked to many positive psychological and academic benefits.

Outcomes

The research will play an advocacy role where the voices of participants can raise our awareness of their experiences of specialist hubs and evaluate these. I hope this will result in change and an even more positive school experience for them

The Children and Families Act 2014 sets out a statutory duty for local authorities to keep provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) under review, in order to ensure that the provision reflects and addresses local needs.

This study hopes to encourage professionals (within the school and wider local authority) to reflect upon practices which facilitate inclusion and sense of belonging in education, especially in relation to specialist hubs. It could help to inform the inclusion policy of the school and the inclusion agenda of the local authority when commissioning specialist hubs.

As all pupils need an Education, Health and Care Plan to access the provision, they will all have been assessed by an Educational Psychologist. As such, this research may also highlight considerations for their practice (such as outcomes, recommendations and intervention). They may also reflect on whole-school approaches and the impact these have on pupils' sense of belonging. Educational Psychologist aim to reduce barriers to positive educational inclusion and promote wellbeing. Our systemic work within provisions needs to be evaluated and monitored to ensure we can make the biggest effective impact possible.

The findings from the research study will also contribute to the limited body of published research into autistic pupils experiences of school belonging and into lived experiences of accessing a resource base.

Section 3: Conduct and location of Project

Conduct of project
As this is an exploratory study seeking the lived educational experiences of young people, a qualitative and participatory approach is most appropriate. This will allow me to investigate the complexities of the social world by asking "what", "why" and "how" questions. My research is centred on inclusive ideals, so I wish to ensure my methodologies are also participatory, anti-oppressive and facilitate equitable research partnerships that includes pupils in all key aspects.

<ins>Mosaic Approach</ins>

Howard et al (2019 p.1875) highlight the need for "sensitive, creative and personalised ways of capturing experiences within the autistic community, particularly more visual methods".

Interviews typically rely on social communication, which may create barriers for some of the pupils I am working with. Furthermore, belonging is a complex social phenomena, so may not come to light via more traditional words-only interviews. Although interviews differ in the flexibility, they can be restrictive in that the individual often only has the opportunity to give their views on donated themes based on the questions posed to them. Such questions may be of little relevance to what pupils perceive to be important for their sense of belonging in school, given its subjective nature.

I intend to adopt a mosaic approach, utilising visual methodologies such as school tours, photography, drawing and writing. These different techniques demonstrate a move away from conventional IPA guidelines in recognition that the autistic community may require or prefer different platforms for

articulating their lived experience. Reid et al (2018) also conclude that such techniques in qualitative research:

- Empower marginalized, 'hard to reach' groups (such as pupils on the autism spectrum)
- Facilitate in-depth interpretative discussions of abstract, 'metaphorical' concepts, sensitive issues (abstract concepts may be difficult for pupils on the autism spectrum to discuss without support from concrete, visual resources)
- Synthesise data with other methods to strengthen and enhance trustworthiness of findings, demonstrating credibility, transformability, dependability and confirmability

It is anticipated that each interview will be conducted over 2 or 3 sessions, lasting approximately 45 minutes per session.

School Tour

Tours are often utilised in the mosaic approach, as the physical process allows pupils to share "local knowledge" of their own environment. Clark and Moss (2011) argue that the process extends the ways adults listen to pupils, as pupils are in control of both the touring event and of what is documented about it

I will ask pupils to give me a tour of their school and use this as an opportunity for a walking interview. Having a clear purpose may help to reduce social-communication demands and make pupils feel less pressured. Clark et al, (2017) also notes that this process is more "alive" than the traditional and sterile environment of typical interview room.

I am interested in what pupils show me and highlight as being important to them – for example, is the tour confined to the resource base or does it mainly encapsulate the wider school? Will pupils show me where they socially interact or eat lunch, or will they focus on places where they learn? I am interested in doing this independently of the term "belonging" in order to see what pupils truly deem to be of importance or significance in their school.

 Drawing and Writing

Drawing has been used as a method for gathering pupil's perspectives and gaining an understanding of their experiences in many studies and is considered a valuable 'springboard' for discussion.

In order to explore pupil's understanding and construction of "belonging", I will give them a large piece of paper and ask them to write or draw what comes to mind when they think about that term. They will be reminded that there are no right or wrong answers.

The use of drawing is being utilised as a means of facilitating discussions, listening to what the pupils say whilst completing the drawing and once the drawing is finished. Pupils will often verbalise their thoughts and ideas while creating a picture and drawing can be an interactive experience.

Unlike traditional "draw, write and tell" methodologies, I will not be interpreting the drawing. Instead, I am of the philosophy that the drawings have no fixed meaning and instead act as objects which participants use to relate to and communicate with me as a researcher and express their view of belonging in school. Language remains the "data" which will be analysed This also means that pupils retain ownership over their drawings and do not have to share these with me to take away if they do not wish to do so.

Similarly to the tour, drawing also reduces social communication demands. As Einarsdóttir, Dockett and Perry (2009) explain:
"When engaged in conversations with children, drawing can provide a focus that enables children to interact on their own terms – for example, by not necessarily maintaining eye contact with an adult, by

having something to do when interacting with others and by controlling the discussion about drawing"
(p.229)

Photo-elicitation Interview

After the first interview session, pupils will be given a school camera and be asked to take 5-10 photographs over the course of 2- 3 weeks, depicting what impacts their experiences of belonging in school. Pupils will then select 5 photographs that they deem to be most important and these will be used, alongside open-ended questions, to structure the rest of the interview. I have chosen this methodology over pupils taking photographs during the tour in order to support pupils to feel prepared for the interview and to give them time to think about what is important to them within their everyday lives (rather than putting them on the spot). I hope that photographs will therefore be more authentic and less staged for the purpose of the research. Furthermore, they may be unable to take photographs of what they want on the tour, as other pupils may be accessing their favoured places.

The photographs act as a prompt about what pupils had previously reflected as being important. Because the children take the photographs themselves, they decide on the topics they want to talk about instead of commenting on adult and researcher-centric perspectives. It is my hope that this methodological approach will allow new and unexplored themes to emerge from pupils, which may have historically been taken for granted or not emerged in a solely verbal exchange.

I will annotate the images with the pupils. This is so that pupils can either write about the photograph themselves, or see what I have written and check if it is correct. It will also convey the message that I consider what they are saying to be interesting and valuable (Brooker, 2001).

I have considered whether or not to include the photographs in my research. As with the drawings, the pupil's narrative of why they took the photo will be considered more meaningful than the image itself (Kress, 2005). Smith et al (2009) note that it is possible to publish work that has used photo-elicitation and not include any example photographs. Nevertheless, Pyle (2013) argues that including quotations without the corresponding photograph can silence young people's accounts. I have therefore chosen to let pupils decide whether or not they would like their photographs included in the research with a separate consent form for this [appendix X]. No photographs containing people will be included.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

All my interactions will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews will then be analysed using IPA. IPA is concerned with the way that people make sense of their world and the experiences within it. It aims to find out in rich detail how people make sense of their lived experiences, feelings and perceptions using phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. The approach is pupil led and collaborative which will give pupils a voice and hopefully try to equalise the balance of power.

IPA requires researchers to consider the impact of their own experiences and preconceptions on research design and procedures. Such reflexivity acknowledges potential discrepancies between the participant's words and the researcher's interpretation of those words. Double hermeneutics involves recognising that I, as a researcher, will be attempting to make sense of somebody else's meaning making. This reflectivity may also help to address the argument that non-autistic people (such as myself) may have difficulties in understanding the experiences of autistic individuals.

Geographic location of project

The research will be conducted in a large, rural Local Authority in England. It will be in one resource base, which is attached to a large secondary school.

Section 4: Research Participants and Recruitment

Does the project involve human participants?

Note: 'Participation' includes both active participation (such as when participants take part in an interview) and cases where participants take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time (for example, in crowd behaviour research).

Yes   ☒
No   ☐

If you have answered NO please go on to Section 8 of this form. If you have answered YES please complete the rest of this section and then continue on to section 5.

Who will the participants be?

Describe the number of participants and important characteristics (such as age, gender, location, affiliation, level of fitness, intellectual ability etc.). Specify any inclusion/exclusion criteria to be used.

I will be recruiting approximately 4 participants who access the specialist hub. The study will adopt a purposive rather than probability sampling approach, to obtain a relatively homogeneous sample. This is because I hope my participants will offer insight into a particular experience - accessing a resource base (Smith et al., 2009). Although I am hoping to represent pupils of all genders, there is a diagnostic bias for males and very few females access the resource base (currently 1). I am hoping to include pupils in Year 7 – Year 10. I will not be including pupils in Year 11 as I hope to collect my data in the summer term, and do not wish to impede on their revision or examinations.

Criteria for accessing the specialist hub (as defined by the Local Authority) are as follows:

The child/young person will:

(all of these factors must be evident through the process of statutory assessment)?

- be of secondary school age (11 - 16) on admission to the hub
- have a statement of educational needs or an Education Health and Care Plan
- have special educational needs in the area of communication and interaction as the main area of difficulty
- be able to access a mainstream curriculum, appropriate to their age, with or without support, but within the broad average range of ability or above
- have found a mainstream setting highly challenging (for example the child may have withdrawn from regular school attendance and/or have been excluded from a mainstream setting)
- require sustained support in order to develop and maintain peer relationships (i.e. will require explicit teaching or intervention from specialist staff on an ongoing basis)
- require regular access to small group teaching and/or personalised support from specialist staff in order to access mainstream lessons

In addition, the child/young person may:

- have sensory sensitivities requiring adaptations to their environment on a regular basis (for example, they may require access to a low arousal environment or there may be evidence that loud or unexpected noise causes considerable distress)
- require a low distraction environment in order to sustain learning, including access to teaching outside the mainstream classroom for substantial periods of the day
- have a diagnosis of an autistic spectrum condition (ASD or ASC) (Although this will be required to take part in the research)
- require a highly structured daily routine
- experience high levels of anxiety in a mainstream setting
- have specific areas of strength or skill requiring access to a mainstream setting within a supportive environment

Additional exclusionary criteria is:

Pupils who are currently experiencing high levels of mental distress

How will the participants be recruited?

A meeting will be set up with the resource base manager to share information about the study and requesting permission to work in the school. This will be facilitated by the link EP to the school, whose role is also to develop educational provision for children with an autistic spectrum label within the county. Although I am reluctant for staff at the resource base to be gatekeepers to the research, they are well placed to identify participants and it is likely pupils will feel more comfortable talking about the research with someone familiar and with whom they trust. I will therefore ask keyworkers to discuss the research with pupils and share information sheets. To avoid exploiting the relationships between the staff and the pupils, I will ask the keyworkers to make it clear that pupils are under no obligation to participate and should not be coerced in any way.

Section 5: Consent

What process will be used to obtain consent?

As all of the pupils are under 16 years, parental consent will need be required as well as pupil consent. Any pupil interested in taking part in the research will have a parental information sheet and consent form sent home. I will use university headed paper as opposed to the EPS headed paper, to highlight my role as a researcher rather than a Trainee Educational Psychologist. This will stress that the purpose of the sessions as inquiry-based rather than as psychological assessment or intervention. When parental consent forms are returned, the specialist hub Manager can contact me to make arrangements for a meeting with prospective participants. I will have an initial meeting with pupils where I can talk to them further about the research (in an age-appropriate, language friendly way), show them the recording equipment/camera and let them practice with these if they wish. This will not only enable them to become familiar with technical equipment, it will also demystify the research process so they feel more like participants than objects of research. I will then ask staff to talk to pupils without me being present, to ensure that they have a safe person who they can vocalise any concerns/questions to or opt out to. If they wish to proceed, they can sign the consent form. This process will help determine whether pupils are competent' and confident enough to grant or withdraw consent (having asked questions such as who may hear the recording, who I am etc). The information can also be captured in a social story if appropriate.

Using a participatory approach, the pupils will be taking photographs, which raises a number of ethical considerations. Mandleco (2013) recommended that participants engaging in photo-elicitation interviewing should seek the consent of people that they wished to include in photographs to be used within the research. Given the age of my participants (12-15 years), I will ask the keyworker to obtain their written consent using the form provided [please see appendix]. Guidelines have also been written to guide participants regarding what they should and should not take photographs of. Although the photographs will be discussed in the interview, I will not publish any photograph which contains a person.

Pupils will be explicitly asked if they want their photographs or drawings included in the published thesis and additional consent will be obtained for this [appendix x]

Please be aware that if the project involves over 16s who lack capacity to consent, separate approval will be required from the Health Research Authority (HRA) in line with the Mental Capacity Act.

Please attach a copy of the Participant Information Sheet (if applicable), the Consent Form (if applicable), the content of any telephone script (if applicable) and any other material that will be used in the consent process.

Note: Guidance from Legal Services on wording relating to the Data Protection Act 2018 can be accessed at https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/legal-services/What-we-do/Data-Protection/resources.aspx.

Use of deception?

Will the participants be deceived in any way about the purpose of the study?

Yes ☐
No ☒

If yes, please describe the nature and extent of the deception involved. Include how and when the deception will be revealed, and the nature of any explanation/debrief will be provided to the participants after the study has taken place.

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 6: Participant compensation, withdrawal and feedback to participants

What, if any, feedback will be provided to participants?

Participants will receive a written summary of their individual feedback.

What arrangements will be in place for participant withdrawal?
During the interview process, I will provide each pupil with a card which they can turn over to indicate whether or not they want to continue with no negative consequences and also to communicate if they would like a break at any point. The information and consent sheet will also reiterate that they can contact me up to 2 weeks after the interview to withdraw if they later change their mind. If a participant does wish to withdraw, their data will be destroyed. A stamped addressed postcard will be given to each participant stating a request for withdrawal from the study; this will avoid embarrassment or coercion to continue.

Please confirm the specific date/timescale to be used as the deadline for participant withdrawal and ensure that this is consistently stated across all participant documentation.
2 weeks (as after this I will start to analyse the data)

What arrangements will be in place for participant compensation?

Will participants receive compensation for participation?

Yes ☐
No ☒

If yes, please provide further information about the nature and value of any compensation and clarify whether it will be financial or non-financial.

Section 7: Confidentiality/anonymity

Will the identity of the participants be known to the researcher?

Will participants be truly anonymous (i.e. their identity will not be known to the researcher)?

Yes   ☐
No   ☒

In what format will data be stored?

Will participants' data be stored in identifiable format, or will it be anonymised or pseudo-anonymised (i.e. an assigned ID code or number will be used instead of the participant's name and a key will kept allowing the researcher to identify a participant's data)?

- The school or local authority will not be named throughout the research.
- No identifiable photographs or drawings will be published.
- Participants can choose their own pseudonym to give them agency, ensure confidentiality and yet allow each participant to identify their own data.

Will participants' data be treated as confidential?

Will participants' data be treated as confidential (i.e. they will not be identified in any outputs from the study and their identity will not be disclosed to any third party)?

Yes   ☒
No   ☐

If you have answered no to the question above, meaning that participants' data will not be treated as confidential (i.e. their data and/or identities may be revealed in the research outputs or otherwise to third parties), please provide further information and justification for this:

Although pseudonyms are being used, I will also be using quotations. It is possible that people who know the young person well will be able to identify them from their quotations. In my consent form, I will make it explicit that people who know the young people well may be able to identify them from their responses in my thesis (although schools and the Local Authority will only get collective feedback and not individual feedback to try to mitigate this).

Section 8: Storage, access and disposal of data

How and where will the data (both paper and electronic) be stored, what arrangements will be in place to keep it secure and who will have access to it?

Please note that for long-term storage, data should usually be held on a secure University of Birmingham IT system, for example BEAR (see
https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/it/teams/infrastructure/research/bear/index.aspx).

The interviews will be audio recorded on a Dictaphone and transferred onto an encrypted, password protected memory stick. Recordings will be deleted from the Dictaphone immediately after they have been transferred. Once the recordings have been typed verbatim and stored securely, the recordings will be erased.

The research methods I am adopting will involve photo-elicitation. Visual methods of data collection in education research do not have a history of established ethical practice (Prosser, 2000). Photographs will be taken on school equipment and will not be transported outside of the school at any point without additional consent. The young person can decide whether they wish to delete the photographs at the end of the interview, or leave it on the school equipment. Any photographs or drawings that are consented to be included will also be transferred to the secure memory stick (the drawings will be photographed and the originals returned to the pupil).

All hard documents (such as consent forms, notes etc) will be stored in a locked filing cabinet within the Educational Psychology office of the Local Authority. A fob is required to enter the building and a key in order to access the storage cabinet.

Data retention and disposal

The University usually requires data to be held for a minimum of 10 years to allow for verification. Will you retain your data for at least 10 years?

Yes   ☒
No   ☐

If data will be held for less than 10 years, please provide further justification:

Click or tap here to enter text.

What arrangements will be in place for the secure disposal of data?

Hard data will be securely shredded. Electronic data will be permanently deleted.

Section 9: Other approvals required

Are you aware of any other national or local approvals required to carry out this research?

E.g. clearance from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), Local Authority approval for work involving Social Care, local ethics/governance approvals if the work will be carried out overseas, or approval from NOMS or HMPPS for work involving police or prisons? If so, please provide further details:

No

For projects involving NHS staff, is approval from the Health Research Authority (HRA) needed in addition to University ethics approval?

If your project will involve NHS staff, please go to the HRA decision tool at http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/ to establish whether the NHS would consider your project to be research, thus requiring HRA approval in addition to University ethics approval. Is HRA approval required?

Yes   ☐
No   ☒

Please include a print out of the HRA decision tool outcome with your application.

Section 10: Risks and benefits/significance

Benefits/significance of the research

Outline the potential significance and/or benefits of the research

This study hopes to encourage professionals to reflect upon practices which facilitate inclusion and sense of belonging in education, especially in relation to resource bases. I want participants voices to be heard in relation to their school experiences and how they experience belonging. This may encourage:

- SEN officers to reflect on the placements offered to pupils;
- Commissioners to reflect on provision being funded and available to pupils
- Educational Psychologists to reflect on their role in facilitating outcomes for this cohort regarding sense of belonging, and the recommendations being made. They may also reflect on whole-school approaches and the impact these have on pupils' sense of belonging.
- Staff employed in resource bases to reflect on local practices.

The findings from the research study will also contribute to the limited body of published research into autistic pupils experiences of school belonging and into lived experiences of accessing a resource base.

Risks of the research

Outline any potential risks (including risks to research staff, research participants, other individuals not involved in the research, the environment and/or society and the measures that will be taken to minimise any risks and the procedures to be adopted in the event of mishap.) **Please ensure that you include any risks relating to overseas travel and working in overseas locations as part of the study, particularly if the work will involve travel to/working in areas considered unsafe and/or subject to travel warnings from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (see** https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice). *Please also be aware that the University insurer, UMAL, offers access to RiskMonitor Traveller, a service which provides 24/7/365 security advice for all travellers and you are advised to make use of this service (see* https://umal.co.uk/travel/pre-travel-advice/).

The outlining of the risks in this section does not circumvent the need to carry out and document a detailed Health and Safety risk assessment where appropriate – see below.

There is no risk of physical harm to participants over and above that expected in the course of ordinary daily life

Pupils may feel anxiety talking to an unfamiliar adult – A photograph of my face will be on the information sheets. I will meet participants prior to the interviews to talk to them about the research process. Pupils will have my work details so that they can contact me before or after the interview if needed. Time will be invested at the beginning of the interviews to help participants feel safe, supported and valued. Methodologies have been designed to put the pupils at ease, for example, starting the interview with a tour of the school. Photo-elicitation is also seen by many as a good way of building relationships between researcher and participants (Mandleco, 2013).

Pupils may feel anxious deviating from their normal school routine – I will ask the keyworkers to prepare pupils for my visit in ways which suit the individuals best. This may involve me writing preparatory letters to pupils. Pupils will know what day and time I will be arriving, and will also have access to a general schedule. I will consult with pupils beforehand regarding where they would like to meet (provided that the place is not overseen or heard by school staff).

Pupils may become distressed talking about belonging – A strengths-based approach is being adopted, highlighting when pupils do feel included rather than discussing times when they do not feel included. Pupils will be reminded that they do not need to answer any question they do not want to or that they find difficult. They can use their "break" or "withdraw" card at any time. The methodologies used have been designed to be fun and engaging. Research suggests that photo-elicitation can be beneficial when interviewing anxious pupils as the focus is on the photographs rather than the pupil (Epstein et al., 2008).

It is possible that issues may still be raised regarding a pupil's happiness and inclusion within the school or previous distress reawakened. If the pupil appears to be becoming visible upset, the interview will be stopped and emotional support provided. I will ask the resource base to have a learning mentor/emotional literacy support assistant available for the pupil participants to talk to after the interview or in the next few months if needed. An exclusion criterion will ensure no participant who is currently experiencing high levels of mental distress is included in the study.

If serious concerns are raised about participants sense of belonging in school, I will seek permission in advance to highlight this to staff and arrange a review for parents, staff and the pupil to prepare a plan to address this.

This risk of emotional distress is further minimised by my training in therapeutic approaches as part of her educational and child psychology doctorate. Therefore, I am in the position to conduct interviews in a sensitive manner, with empathetic listening and attuned responses to children's emotional needs.

Pupils may make a disclosure - It will be made explicit in the consent information that issues of concern raised during the process of the interviews will be followed up by the school Head of provision, and/or the educational psychologist (EP) for that school if appropriate. I will follow the local authority's safeguarding protocol (see appendix). This will also be made explicit verbally at the beginning of each interview. If a disclosure is made, pupils will be informed that I will be passing the information on.

Pupils' responses may make them identifiable – As there is only one secondary ASD resource base in the local authority, this may make some of my participants identifiable. Although IPA research typically includes a mini biography of each participant, this will be omitted from my research alongside any other identifiable information, where possible. Feedback to school and the local authority will only show collective responses and not individual responses. The information sheet will inform pupils that if someone looks up the thesis and knows them really well (such as family members) they may be able to identify them. If information is provided which may presents a risk to organisational reputation, advice will be sought through research supervision regarding the inclusion and communication of this data.

Pupils may take inappropriate or unsafe photographs of themselves or other pupils – I will provide participants with clear guidelines or what photographs can and cannot be taken. This will include making it explicit that they will need permission to include any other pupil or adult in their photographs. I will ask the keyworkers to talk to pupils about camera safety and remind them of these guidelines. Pupils will use school technology to take photographs and thus the images will not leave the school site without additional consent. I will ask school staff to print the photographs for the interview and gatekeep photos which do not adhere to the guidelines. If pupils wish to include other people in their photos, they will need to obtain written consent. Following the interview, participants can choose to keep the photographs or they can be shredded on the school site.

Pupils with language and communication differences may find it hard to express their views – I have included a diverse range of visual data collection tools to enable pupils with different skills and strengths to contribute to the research.

University Health & Safety (H&S) risk assessment

For projects of more than minimal H&S risk it is essential that a H&S risk assessment is carried out and signed off in accordance with the process in place within your School/College and you must provide a copy of this with your application. The risk may be non-trivial because of travel to, or working in, a potentially unsafe location, or because of the nature of research that will carried out there. It could also involve (irrespective of location) H&S risks to research participants, or other individuals not involved directly in the research. Further information about the risk assessment process for research can be found at https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/hr/wellbeing/worksafe/policy/Research-Risk-Assessment-and-Mitigation-Plans-RAMPs.aspx.

Please note that travel to (or through) 'FCO Red zones' requires approval by the University's Research Travel Approval Panel, and will only be approved in exceptional circumstances where sufficient mitigation of risk can be demonstrated.

Section 11: Any other issues

Does the research raise any ethical issues not dealt with elsewhere in this form?

If yes, please provide further information:

No

Do you wish to provide any other information about this research not already provided, or to seek the opinion of the Ethics Committee on any particular issue?

If yes, please provide further information:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 12: Peer review

Has your project received scientific peer review?

Yes ☐
No ☒

If yes, please provide further details about the source of the review (e.g. independent peer review as part of the funding process or peer review from supervisors for PGR student projects):

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 13: Nominate an expert reviewer

For certain types of project, including those of an interventional nature or those involving significant risks, it may be helpful (and you may be asked) to nominate an expert reviewer for your project. If you anticipate that this may apply to your work and you would like to nominate an expert reviewer at this stage, please provide details below.

Title: Click or tap here to enter text.
First name: Click or tap here to enter text.
Last name: Click or tap here to enter text.

Email address: Click or tap here to enter text.
Phone number: Click or tap here to enter text.

Brief explanation of reasons for nominating and/or nominee's suitability:

Click or tap here to enter text.

Section 14: Document checklist

Please check that the following documents, where applicable, are attached to your application:

Recruitment advertisement ☒
Participant information sheet ☒
Consent form ☒
Questionnaire ☐
Interview/focus group topic guide ☒

Please proof-read study documentation and ensure that it is appropriate for the intended audience before submission.

Section 15: Applicant declaration

Please read the statements below and tick the boxes to indicate your agreement:

I submit this application on the basis that the information it contains is confidential and will be used by the University of Birmingham for the purposes of ethical review and monitoring of the research project described herein, and to satisfy reporting requirements to regulatory bodies. The information will not be used for any other purpose without my prior consent. ☒

The information in this form together with any accompanying information is complete and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief and I take full responsibility for it. ☒

I undertake to abide by University Code of Practice for Research (https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/legal/research.pdf) alongside any other relevant professional bodies' codes of conduct and/or ethical guidelines. ☒

I will report any changes affecting the ethical aspects of the project to the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer. ☒

I will report any adverse or unforeseen events which occur to the relevant Ethics Committee via the University of Birmingham Research Ethics Officer. ☒

Appendix G: Alternative Methodologies Considered

	Narrative	Discourse Analysis	Realistic Evaluation	IPA
About this approach	Focuses on the lives of individuals as told through their own stories (Moen, 2006). It relies on how people have constructed and made sense of events which have occurred in their lives. The emphasis is on both what is said and how it is narrated.	Examines the way language is constructed within a social context with the belief that the way we use language is purposeful, regardless of whether language choices are conscious or unconscious (Holt, 2011). There are many ways to conduct discourse analysis (Burman & Parker, 1993)	Identifies 'what works in which circumstances and for whom?' by finding generative mechanisms (social or psychological drivers) that explain 'how' the outcomes were caused and the influence of context. It aims to find causal relationships (Pawson & Tilley, 1997)	Aims to find out in rich detail how people make sense of their lived experiences, feelings and perceptions and give a detailed interpretation of this in order to try to understand the experience. (Smith et al, 2009)
Assumptions of belonging	Assumes historical, social and contextual factors influence how stories are created; aligning with the transient nature of belonging (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) . Stories could centre on social aspects of belonging, self-identity and perceived control over belonging.	Assumes social and historical context of autism in relation to attitudes and power will impact on students' sense of belonging. This is given it's constructionist ontology (Holt, 2011)	Assumes specific factors can be identified which make a hub a successful provision to support belongingness for certain autistic students. It considers the mechanism, the context and the resulting outcome (Pawson & Tilley,1997)	Assumes people and their life worlds are integrally intertwined – considering the experiences of autistic students as being place-bound, context-bound and history-bound. (Smith et al, 2009)

Strengths for my research	Captures individual experience and follow students' journeys in the hub over time (i.e. the transition to the hub, the gradual integration process; the change of peer groups and staffing over time).	Would allow me to explore how the hub is constructed differently by students who attend it, other students, hub staff and mainstream staff. This recognises the reciprocity principle in belonging.	Would enable me to understand the mechanisms involved and factors that are important within this particular school context for promoting belonging. Will help identify which students would benefit most from accessing a hub provision.	Promotes in-depth analysis of lived experiences of students which will help me to understand the meanings participants give to their educational context, events and experiences.
Limitations for my research	Retrospective methodology is reliant on memory. Adaptations may be necessary to support narrative abilities for participants e.g. more object-focused (i.e. via photographs, concrete visual aids.	Students discourses are often oppressed and not the dominant and influential discourse at play. Analysing discourses may be less appropriate for young people with difficulties in the area of speech, language and communication.	Does not explicitly focus on views and experiences of students directly or Pupil Voice.	Although IPA seeks to understand the lived experiences, it does not explain why they occur. This may not allow me to explore the influence of contextual and psychosocial factors. Adaptations may be necessary to support students to describe their experience.

Appendix H: Information for Parents and Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

School of Education

My name is Emily Williamson and I'm a postgraduate research student at the University of Birmingham. This information leaflet has been given to you because I am seeking consent for your child to take part in a research project which I am undertaking as part of my training to become an educational psychologist.

Before you and your child decide whether you would like to take part, please read this leaflet so that you understand why the research is being conducted and what being part of the project will involve. If you would like further information, or would like to ask any questions about the information below, please do not hesitate to ask (contact details are provided at the end of this leaflet).

Taking part in this study is not compulsory for your son/daughter and not taking part will not have a detrimental effect on the quality of education they receive at the school.

Purpose of the project

The purpose of this project is to contribute to an understanding of how secondary-school students on the autism spectrum / or with social communication and interaction needs and attending a resource base understand and experience school belonging.

My research is strengths-based, exploring what is in place in the resource base to promote belonging (from students' perspectives) and how this can be further developed.

Why is this research being conducted?

Research suggests that a sense of school belonging is fundamental to understanding the effectiveness of educational inclusion. Having a sense of belonging has long been identified as an important aspect in wellbeing and development. Belonging is also linked to many positive psychological and academic benefits.

What would taking part involve?

Myself and/or your child's keyworker would meet with your child on 2 or 3 occasions to talk to them about their experiences in school and how this impacts on their sense of school belonging. Each session will take approximately 45 minutes and will take place in school time. The sessions will be as creative as possible to reduce anxiety and social demands. This includes asking your child to give me a virtual tour of their school on the computer, asking them to do some drawing, and asking them to take photographs of what is important to them in school and helps them to feel like they belong. We would then discuss these things in more detail. Social distancing guidelines would be followed at all times.

What will I do with this information?

In order to ensure that I have an accurate record of what your child has said, all our meetings will be audio recorded. No one else will be permitted to listen to the recordings apart from

myself. Once I have typed up what has been said, the audio recordings will be permanently deleted.

The research will comply with the 2018 Data Protection Act, which assures the safe storage of personal information. Your child's name will be kept anonymous throughout the research and they will be given a fake name in my write up. I will use quotations of what your child has said to me, but this will be linked to a fake name and not contain any identifiable information.

I will not discuss or share what your child has told me with anyone else (with the exception of my research supervisor). However, if your child tells me something which I feel puts them or anyone else at risk of harm, I would have a duty of care to report this information in line with safeguarding procedures (as has been the case throughout your child's life to date).

If serious concerns are raised about your child's sense of belonging in school, this will be followed up with the Head of the Provision and/or the educational psychologist (EP) for that school if appropriate. I will suggest that a review is held in school with yourselves, your child and key members of staff.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

1. Doctoral Thesis report - This research study will be written into a 25 000 word doctoral thesis report for the University of Birmingham. This may be published, in full, online on the e-theses database. An edited, shorter version may be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal for publication, and findings from the study may also be disseminated at conference.

2. Reporting to the hub – Although I will not report to the hub what your child has told me individually, I will provide collective feedback which will summarise what all the children talked about.

3. Reporting to participants – Children who participate in the research will receive a personalised summary (once the data has been analysed) and a letter thanking them for their contribution. They may wish to have the opportunity to display their photographs and drawings or put on an exhibition, but there is no obligation to do so.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of my child taking part?

Although no physical risk will be posed to participants, there is a potential risk that children may identify key elements of school that cause emotional distress. If your child appears to be becoming visible upset, the interview will be stopped and emotional support provided. Your child will be able to take a break or stop the interview at any time. They do not have to answer any questions they do not want to. I will ask the school to make a keyworker available to provide follow-up support to children if necessary.

This risk of emotional distress is further minimised by my training in therapeutic approaches as part of her educational and child psychology doctorate. Therefore, I am in the position to conduct interviews in a sensitive manner, with empathetic listening and attuned responses to children's emotional needs.

I will work with the school to ensure that your child is prepared for my visit in an individualised way to meet their needs.

What are the possible benefits of my child taking part?

The information gained from this study may have implications for improved educational professional practice for staff working in specialist hubs, educational psychologists and other SEND professionals. Information may also help to inform local policies on inclusion.

The research itself may also have a direct, therapeutic impact on children, through the empowering process of being listened to during an in-depth interview, and having the opportunity to give their views in meaningful ways to them.

What if my child changes their mind about taking part?

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary and your child is free to change their mind and withdraw from the project at any point before, during, or up to two weeks after the final interview. They do **<u>not</u>** have to give any reason or explanation. If you or your child wish to withdraw from the study, please fill out the attached postcard and send it back to me in the self-addressed envelope. Provided this is received no later than 2 weeks after the final interview, I will delete and destroy any information your child has provided.

I want more information

If you have any questions regarding the research or would like to know more before you agree to participate, please contact me by phone [phone number] or by email [email].

You can also contact my supervisor [university email].

Parent/Carer Consent Form
Understanding Sense of Belonging for Students Attending Specialist Hubs

Parent/Carer's Name:_____

Your Child's Name:_____

Your Child's Age:_____

Key interests or important Information I should know about your child (if applicable)_____

_____

_____

_____

Please tick the boxes that apply:

Consent
I give consent *for my son/daughter to take part in the above named study.*
I understand that my son/daughter can withdraw from the study any time before [date]

☐

I do not *give consent for my son/daughter to take part in the above named study*

☐

Results
I would like to receive a summary of the findings by post.

☐

I **would not** *like to receive a summary of the findings from the study.*

☐

Your Signature_____   Today's Date: ____/____/____

Please scan or take a photograph of the consent form and email it to me at
▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓*. Alternatively, should it be easier for you to pass the forms onto your son/daughter's school*
please feel free to do so, as they can pass them onto me.

Thank you for supporting this study

Appendix I: Information for Students and Consent Form

BELONGING

WHY AM I CONTACTING YOU?

+ I am interested to hear about your experiences and views of school.
+ I would like to know more about what you think about attending Kettlemere Centre.
+ I want to know how being in the Kettlemere Centre has impacted on your sense of belonging.

WHAT ARE THE AIMS OF THE RESEARCH?

+ To share your views with adults so they can understand and learn from your experiences in school.

+ To help improve services so they are better able to support you and other students in the future.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH INVOLVE?

Meeting you on **2 or 3** occasions (either face to face or on the computer) to talk to you about your experiences in school and about belonging. Your keyworker will tell you more about the activities.
Each session will take between 45 minutes and an hour.
I will be meeting you in the school during school time.
The sessions will involve:

+ You answering some questions about your life in school
+ You drawing and talking to me about what you have drawn
+ You taking photographs and talking to me about them

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE INFORMATION YOU TELL ME.

- If you agree, I will meet with you to do these activities. You will know in advance what day and time I will be coming and what we will be doing. We can meet face to face or on the computer.
- I will audio record what we talk about and type up this recording afterwards using a made-up name (which you can pick). I will then delete the audio recording. (No one else will hear it). The typed up notes will be kept locked away.
- I will think about what you have told me and what other people have told me and write up a report. The report will not use your real name but may include quotations of things you have said.
- If you tell me something which I feel may put you or someone else in danger, I will have to tell someone. If I am worried about you because of what you have told me, I will let Julie Metcalf know and we may arrange a meeting with you and your parents to try to make things better.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY?

- I will write them up as part of my university work.
- I will tell the staff how they make students feel like they belong (but I will NOT tell them who said what or anything you have told me directly)
- I will talk to other Educational Psychologists

I hope that this will make more people think about belonging.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

No, it is up to you to decide.

You will be asked to sign a consent form, which means that you have understood the research and read this information sheet.

You can change your mind about taking part and you do not have to give a reason. You have up to 2 weeks after our last meeting to tell me or your keyworker.

HOW DO I GET INVOLVED?

I will be coming into the school to meet with anybody who is interested in taking part. This will be

At [place in the school] on [date] at [time]

You can meet me and ask any questions.

You can also talk to your keyworker or to [Head of Provision]. You can ask your parents to contact me with questions.

You can email me directly on [enw899@student.bham.ac.uk] or my supervisor [J.Howe.1@bham.ac.uk]

6

Student Consent Form

Understanding Sense of Belonging for Students Attending Specialist Hubs

My Name:_____

Please make sure you have read (or listened to) the Information Sheet before filling out this form.

Please read the sentences below and put a tick in the box if you agree with them.

		Tick if agree
☑ I agree ☐ I disagree	I am choosing to take part in the project	
? ? ? ?	I have had time to think about the information, ask questions and have had these answered.	
STOP	I understand that I can change my mind any time before the project and I will not have to meet with Emily.	
🗑	I understand that even if I have done the interviews with Emily, I can still change my mind up until the Christmas Holidays and she will delete everything that I have said	

	I understand that my voice will be recorded during the project but only Emily will listen to this. She will type up what I said.	
	I know that if Emily becomes worried about what I have said to her, she will need to let someone else know	
	I understand that I do not have to answer any questions during the sessions that I do not want to	
	I understand that the things I talk about in this project will be written in a report. My name will not be used in the report but it may include things that I have said. People who know you really well (like your family) may be able to guess it is you.	

Signature: _____   Date_____/_____/_____

(University of Birmingham)

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Belonging

Keyworker Pack

Contents

Introduction to the Project

Thank you for assisting in this belon ging project for the University of Birmingham.

This project will form part of my thesis research for my Applied Education and Child Psychology Doctorate. We complete in-depth research to understand pedagogy, other people's lived experiences and to help inform educational policy and practice. My key research interests are student voice and inclusion.

Successful and genuine inclusion can be very difficult for students with social communication/interaction needs; especially for academic children who find the social expectations of school very challenging. Research suggests that students' experiences of secondary school are particularly influenced by their social vulnerability and feelings of difference. Some students have highlighted belonging, being accepted and feeling valued, as key definitions of inclusion.

Feeling of belonging in school has also been identified as a key protective childhood experience which is linked to good mental health in adults. Belonging also makes up a core component on the Resiliency Framework – which is becoming increasingly relevant in times of adversity such as Covid-19.

I am interested in how ▮▮▮▮▮▮ promotes sense of school belonging for students. Many students attending this provision have had previous school breakdowns – so I want to understand what makes the difference at this school.

Project aim and research questions

- **How do ▮▮▮▮▮▮ students understand and experience school belonging?**

- **How do practices in the Hub [and wider school/ Local Authority] facilitate belonging for such students?**

CONSENT

As all of the students are under 16 years, parental consent will need be required as well as student consent.

Parental Consent

I understand that parental consent has already been acquired. Additional parental information sheets and consent forms can be found at the back of this booklet.

Student consent

Please can you speak with students during your keyworker sessions and explain the project – as they already have relationships with you and hopefully feel comfortable and safe to decline if they do not wish to take part. I have attached a student information sheet; although this may not be accessible to all students. I am happy to video call any of the students if they wish to talk to me about this directly. Alternatively, they can pass on any questions to yourselves.

If students do wish to take part, please can you support them to sign the consent form.

Students can change their mind about taking part at any point. Please let them know that they can simply tell you and the research can be stopped. After the interviews, the students can still change their minds up until the Christmas Holidays. If a student does want to withdraw from the research, please can you email me to let me know.

Students can also pick their own "code name" to be used in the research. They can talk to you about this and if you could then please let me know what their code name will be.

Please let me know if you feel the student would benefit from a social story to explain all of this and we can work on putting this together.

Activities

I will outline the main activities for the research, but these can be tweaked and amended to be more person-centred for each individual student. You know the students best – so please let me know if you feel these activities would be inappropriate or whether there are particular interests we can utilise.

Interview 1 can be split into two shorter interviews if the student finds it overwhelming to speak with an unfamiliar adult for a long period of time.

Students have 2 weeks to complete the photography task – and the following interview would be scheduled accordingly. I understand that ███████ has ipads/ cameras to use for this activity.

Students will be given the choice as to whether they would like their keyworker to be present for the interview.

School visiting policies dependent – students can also choose whether they would prefer a face to face interview or a video interview.

Interview 1

The purpose of the first interview with young people is to understand their experiences of attending ▮▮▮▮▮ and for them to draw and write about their understanding of belonging; their community and their relationships. Belonging can mean different things to different people. There are no right or wrong answers about what belonging means as we are all different.

I will ask students to draw and write down what belonging means and looks like to them. I will ask them some questions as they go just to make sure I understand what they are drawing. I am firstly interested in what they draw and write spontaneously, but understand that some of the students will need more structure and guidance with this.

Next, I will ask students questions to link to their drawing. This may include:

- Their school experiences/previous schools
  - The school day
    - The lessons
  - People in school
  - Likes and dislikes
- What's most important to them

At the end, the picture should represent the student, people and places which are important to them and how they experience belonging in school.

If the student will find this task overwhelming – we can break it down into two separate sessions.

We can also adjust the materials – paints, felt-tips, collages, computer programmes, Lego etc

Photography Task

At the end of the first activity, I will set students the photography task. They will be asked to take 5-10 photographs in relation to the question

What helps you feel like you belong in school?

Some students may need some more prompting than others – and you can refer back to their belonging drawings to help them. If a student is struggling and needs more help, you can give them some ideas to think about.

- Who they feel happiest/safest/valued/most comfortable spending time with in school
- What they do with these people which makes them feel this way
- What helps them to maintain these relationships (in or out of school)
- Their favourite places in school /where they feel safest/most comfortable
- Where they would go if they needed help
- Where they are proud of in school
- What represents the school best
- Where they wish they could spend more time

These questions are only a guide – and students do not need to take photographs which relate to any of these things if they do not want to. They may define belonging differently.

If other students/staff members are in the photographs, please can you check that they were happy for their photograph to be taken. I will blur out all the faces and uniform logos so nobody will be identifiable.

Please can you also check that the photographs are appropriate. Students may need support to pick their top 5 photographs to share with me before the interview.

During the meeting, we will talk about each photograph in turn and why the student chose to take and share the picture.

The following pages have some information for students and a consent form as to whether the blurred out photograph can go in the report or not.

Appendix K: Interview Schedule for First Interview

- **Welcome Participant**
  Hi X, How are you? Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me today. I am really looking forward to hearing your views about school.
- **Problem Free Talk**
  How has your week/day been?
- **Recap Consent**
  X has very kindly sent over your consent form. Just to remind you, I am doing some research into school belonging and how students experience this. I will be recording our interview using this Dictaphone, but only I will be listening to it. I'll type up what you said and then I will delete the recording. I won't use your name or any information which will let people know it is you I have spoken to. I will use a fake name as well. What would you like your fake name to be? Make up/game character/celebrity?

  Pseudonym _____

  I will then be writing it up for my university project and it might get published. I will talk to staff members, other educational psychologists and other people in the council about the project in general, but I won't say who has said what.

  Would you still like to take part?

  Great. That's fantastic. If you change your mind in the next 2 weeks, just let X know and I won't include your interview in my research.

- Alone or with TA
  Would you X in the room with us or do you want to do it just the two of us?

  That's great. I will ask X not to answer any questions for you or give you any prompts. But if you are wanting some help, then you can ask her.

  That's great. We can go somewhere private so it is just the two of us.

  • *You can stop at any time and* you do not have to answer any questions you don't want to.

  EXPLAIN CARD SYSTEM – I'm happy to continue, I need a break, I want to stop.

  Brilliant – we are going to start now so I will turn on the Dictaphone.

SECTION 1

First, I am just interested to get to know you a little bit.

What Year are you in?

If someone asked you what school do you go to, what would you say?
How long have you been attending this school?

I'm interested in hearing more about your time in school.

History and Belonging over Time What school did you go to before you came here? What were your experiences of your previous school? Did you go to any other schools before/after that? Primary school?	How long were you there for? What was it like there? How did you feel going there?	What made you feel this way?
How did you come to attend [what school they named]? (*Narrative*)	Can you tell me why this school was chosen? How did you feel about coming here? What did you think it would be like?	Was there anything you were worried/ excited about? Can you tell me more about that?
What was it like when you first started? (*Narrative)* Has it changed now?	How did it compare to the other schools you had been to? What was the same? What was different? How has it changed?	Can you tell me more about that?
Belonging within a Community What kind of school is it? What's it like to go here? Tell me about who you spend time with when you are at school? What do you like best about this school? What is most helpful to you? Can you describe to me what you would change about your school if you could?	Tell me a bit more about break times and lunch times at school? Tell me a bit more about lesson..? What are your relationships like with other pupils in the school? What activities do you do together? Have you told anyone else about this? What happened?	What about students who do/ don't come to the resource base?

Thank you – that's been really helpful

SECTION 2

Now we are going to talk a bit about belonging. You have a choice now. You can either use

- Drawing and art
- Lego
- Writing
- Talking

Belonging can mean different things to different people. There are no right or wrong answers about because we are all different.

I want you to create a piece of art/lego/writing which tells me about how you understand the word belonging in school. I will ask you to tell me about what you drawing/writing/making/building and what

made you chose to include that. *You can draw/build/write anything you want to including things outside of school which may have impacted on your sense of belonging in school.*

[If more structure and prompts are needed]

- You can draw about times where you felt really happy and valued in school. What was happening? What were you doing? Who else was there? What were they doing?

OR

- You can draw someone who feels like they belong. What will they be doing? Who else will be in the picture? What would they be doing? Can you tell me how they feel?

|	*Possible questions*
Descriptive	- Can you talk me through what you have drawn/built? - What have you drawn here? What made you think about that? - I see you have written the word X, can you tell me a little bit more about that please? - What does that word mean to you?
Evaluative	- Why do you think that is important? - How do you feel about that? - What do you want me to understand from this part of the drawing?
Comparative	What are the main differences between feeling like this and feeling like you don't belong?
Narrative	- Can you think about a time you felt like that in school? - When have you felt like this?
Circular (note that this relies on Theory of Mind)	- Who would notice if you were feeling like/doing that? How could they tell? What would they do?

Section 3
This is the circle of belonging. If we could place this picture in the centre of the circle. People inside the circle feel like they really belong when thet are in school. They are at number 1. People outside the circle do not feel they belong at all when they are in school. They are at number 5..

Which circle are you in most of the time at school now?	Tell me what made you choose this number. Has this changed over time? Are there times when you are further inside/ further outside? When do you most feel in the centre?	Can you tell me more about this [your friends/your lessons/your teachers] Where were you at [previous school]? Where were you last year? Lockdown/covid? Any particular lessons?

	When do you feel most at the edge?	Any particular part of the school? When you are with any particular people?
Which circle would you like to be in most of the time at school?	What would need to happen for you to get there?	
What kind of person would feel like they belong at this school?	What would school be like for them? How would other people act towards them?	

Appendix L: Circle of Belonging Activity (Myles, 2017)

5

4

3

2

1

Belonging
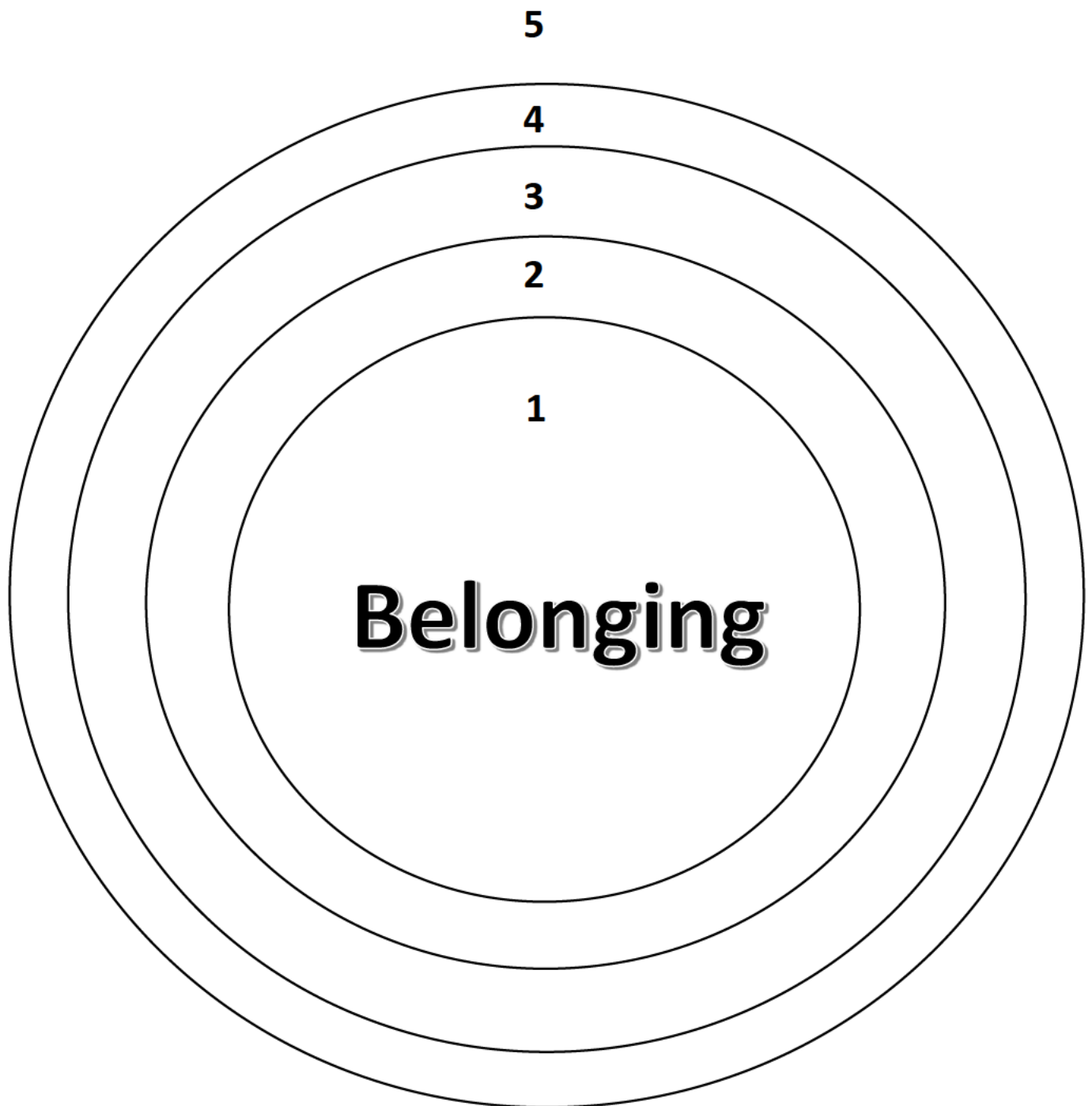
Appendix M: Exerts from Interview 1 with Exploratory Comments and Emergent Themes- Danny

Emergent Themes	Line	Initial Transcript – DD 1	Exploratory Comments Descriptive, *Linguistic*, <u>Conceptual</u>	Interpretation and Summarising
Nervous during transition **Role of peer support in welcoming to new school** **Sense of loss** **Group activities** **Puts him at ease - relax** **Contact transcending school boundaries** **Relationship linked to learning and physical proximity?** **Productive lessons – staff ratio** **Others holding him back in mainstream**	107. 108. 109. 110. 111. 112. 113. 114. 115. 116. 117. 118. 119. 120. 121. 122. 123. 124. 125. 126. 127. 128. 129. 130. 131. 132. 133. 134. 135. 136. 137. 138. 139. 140. 141.	D: I was a bit nervous at the start but I got settled in quite easily. The year 11s at the time were really nice. E: That's good D: They've gone now of course E: So did you make friends with them? D: Yeah I made friends with both of them E: Can you tell me about that? D: Yeah we all relaxed back in what was the year 10 room. We all played games together like cards and that E: Yeah D: Yeah. But now they've gone and I can only play with [peer] which is sad E: How do you get on with [peer]? D: Were good friends. We have contact outside of school. Half the time its stupid though E: What do you mean when you say it's stupid? D: Well half the time it's like sending stupid images to each other with no context E: Like memes? D: Those exactly. E: Oh okay. Do you spend much time together in school? D: Yeah maths and English we um sit together next to each in as were the only 2 in there E: And how do you feel about having those lessons just the two of you D: I feel like its more productive as the teachers can focus on us two and with what we're struggling with instead of having to explain to the entire class something we had already figured out earlier on. So we are able to go ahead if necessary E: So how does that differ to if you were having those lessons with the rest of your year group? D: I feel it would be a lot slower and id get a lot less help E: And do you do many lessons with the rest of your year group? D: Yes everything except maths and English. And maybe some others that I have forgotten. E: Yeah. What are those lessons like then?	Nervous starting a new school – but quickly overcome due to peer support. Felt looked after by older peers. Grieving – a sense of loss. *"Gone" – not that they've left the school, almost as if they have disappeared entirely.* Active friendships with the Year 11 students. but they've moved on – void in his social circle. Key support network lost. <u>Relax – implies that felt at ease with them.</u> <u>Use of joint games – facilitates belonging by promoting relationship building and maintenance?</u> <u>Sad – not happy about only having 1 peer left to play with. Sense of loss.</u> *Only – implies this is not enough.* Contrast with previous school – group of 5. *<u>Term "contact" is very formal and professional. Not a relationship. Although their contact transcends school boundaries – how positively is their relationship viewed?</u>* *<u>Terms contact "stupid" – minimising the r/s? How meaningful is the contact?</u>* <u>Danny first talks about their relationship in the context of learning and physical proximity – not in terms of friendship/social time etc. Only 2 in class together – spend the most time together.</u> <u>Choice vs circumstance</u> <u>Higher staff ratios = more productivity</u> <u>Sees classmates as holding him back? They already know what to do – don't want to wait whilst teacher explains to rest of class. – Positive ingroup identity? We are the clever ones?</u> <u>Tailored support</u> <u>Doesn't need to compromise. Pace of learning important</u>	Danny was nervous about starting at the school but felt well supported by peers in Yr 11. He still feels a sense of loss in their leaving; as he had built emotional bonds with them and spent a lot of time together. Danny reflects on his diminishing social support network, noting that he is sad that he only has one friend left in school – not enough? Although he contacts this peer outside of school, he is unsure how meaningful this is. Danny enjoys small group learning as he feels this enables him to get ahead without others holding him back. This shows a potentially positive

Emergent Themes	Line	Initial Transcript – DD 1	Exploratory Comments Descriptive, *Linguistic*, <u>Conceptual</u>	Interpretation and Summarising
– positive ingroup identity? Pace of learning important Tailored support Less support in M/S & more support in RB Enjoyment of mainstream lessons – practical elements Relationship with teacher Staff as knowledgable Functional role of teacher? Individualisation and tailored support. Seeing each child as an individual	142. 143. 144. 145. 146. 147. 148. 149. 150. 151. 152. 153. 154. 155. 156. 157. 158. 159. 160. 161. 162. 163. 164. 165. 166. 167. 168. 169. 170. 171. 172. 173. 174. 175. 176.	D: They were exactly as I described it earlier. There's a lot less support going towards me in particular but at the same time they are often quite fun E: So what support do you get in those lessons? D: The main teacher often helps me and sometimes the teaching assistant. E: Yeah. And you said they can be quite fun. what would a fun lesson be like then? D: In science it would be something practical or any lesson with my biology teacher. He's a funny teacher. I **think literally everyone likes him.** Hes probably the most knowledgeable in the entire school in fact. He can do all three sciences. Hes funny. **Everyone** likes him. **He's probably one of the best people in school** E: So you've listed a lot of good qualities there. So what's most important to you? What makes a good teacher? D: Well actually being able to teach is a good start. But then also to make it engaging if he makes it entertaining for us which he often does. E: So what does he do to make it entertaining? D: I don't know how to explain it exactly. It's the way he talks and the way he acts. E: Yeah D: And he always thinks about the students. During our revision sessions recently, because exams are coming up and all that so. Instead of just giving us two blank pieces of paper and saying "get to work" he actually made everyone a little revision sheet of his own and told us to expand on it. He added a few extra sessions for us to work on E: And how did that make you feel? D: It felt pretty good yeah. E: What was really special about that? D: The fact he thought about the students a lot more than some of the other teachers do. E: Yeah. Okay. What would you say you like best about this school then? D: The [resource base] is definitely one of the biggest things I like about the school. E: Can you tell me a bit more about the [resource base] then please?	<u>Danny spends majority of his time accessing mainstream lessons/</u> <u>Less support in mainstream</u> <u>Enjoyment of mainstream lessons</u> <u>Not just left to Hub staff – main teachers continues to take responsibility over Danny's learning.</u> *Use of often and sometimes – CT takes on this duty more frequently.* <u>All lessons with biology teacher considered fun – it is the person delivering the lesson which makes it enjoyable rather than the content itself?</u> *EVERYONE likes him – collective inclusive pronouns Shows this is universally agreed? 'Literally' to intensify this.* *Values and admires staff knowledge* *Best PEOPLE not best teacher. Prefers him to peers? Prefers him to RB staff too. Formed a very good relationship.* <u>Being able to teach - Functional aspect of school – most important thing is that they can do their job and deliver teaching.</u> <u>PCP – does he feel other teachers cannot deliver on this? Good start – needs to extend part this.</u> <u>Values individualised approaches – same as what he values with separate teaching in the resource base – the tailored support. More support = cares more? More individualised = better understood?.</u> *The students – not "us". Less collective language here.* <u>Doesn't perceive other teachers to care about him as much.</u> <u>Values the RB</u> *One of – what are the other things he likes?* *Concept of RB staff as struggling with learning – contrasts with inclusion criteria (average or above IQ). Also contrasts with own experiences – other*	**in-group identity; framing the hub students as more able/less disruptive? Tailored support and appropriate pace is important to him.** Within MS lessons, DD feels he gets less support. He is supported predominantly by the class teacher rather than staff in the RB. DD has a v. good r/s with his biology teacher. DD values teachers knowledge and teaching style; particularly when teaching is individualised and tailored (as it is in the resource base). This makes Danny feel valued, respected and understood. As a result, he has formed a r/s closer than he has with anyone else in the whole school. However, he does not feel that this approach is taken by

Emergent Themes	Line	Initial Transcript – DD 1	Exploratory Comments Descriptive, *Linguistic*, Conceptual	Interpretation and Summarising
	285.	E: Thank you. Okay I'm going to ask you to build what you think belonging	*They say – is this something he has been told rather than something he has actively experienced?*	
	286.	in school looks like for you. Belonging can mean different things to		
	287.	different people. There are no right or wrong answers about because we		
	288.	are all different. I'm going to ask you some questions about what you're	Importance of being understood.	
	289.	building as you go.	Proximity has allowed them to grow closer	
	290.	D: Yeah	emotionally. Enjoying each other's company. This	
	291.	E: You can build whatever belonging means to you then out of the lego	is facilitated through shared games and activities.	
Friendships	292.	D: The first thing about belonging I find is friendships is a big one	Vehicle for social interatcion	
	293.	E: So what is it about friendships which is important for belonging?	Having someone to help him in difficult times –	
	294.	D: Because friends often make a situation a lot easier for you. They say.	supportive network.	
emotional support	295.	In a way its nice to have someone who can understand you	Constructs the recipriocity of this – him equally being able to provide support to others.	
	296.	E: Yeah		
Being understood	297.	D: And who can be emotional support in a way too	Also constructs the idea that you can enjoy someones company without giving anything or expecting anything in return.	Danny values the reciprocal emotional support friendships provide; such as having someone to confide in when he is sad and someone to help him in tough times (and vice versa). This can help him feel understood. However, Danny could not think of any times in school when this support is actively available to him. He does have a close friend in school but their relationship is based primarily on enjoying one another's company.
	298.	E: Yes. And do you experience that in school?		
	299.	D: Well [peer] definitely does.		
	300.	E: Yeah? Can you tell me more about your friendship together. How does	Can't think of times in school where he has had that relationship. Not to say he hasn't experienced it, but cant readily access this experience to share with me	
	301.	he understand you?		
	302.	D: Um hes definitely a good friend. We spend a lot of time together.		
	303.	Which has allowed us to get a lot closer. And weve been able to have fun		
Proximity	304.	together by playing games and that.	Can experience conflict and arguments in school – feels he cant get on with anybody	
Enjoy each others	305.	E: So what makes a good friend for you? What qualities do you look for in		
company –	306.	a friend?		
shared	307.	D: What makes a good friendship? Having friends. If youre sad then they		
activities and	308.	listen to you and hear you out. They help you when youre having a tough		
fun	309.	time and you help them when theyre having a tough time.		
Emotional	310.	E: Yeah		
support	311.	D: You enjoy being around them and spending time together. Those are		
Reciprocity	312.	the things I think of		
Not	313.	E: When do you feel like you have this?		
experiencing	314.	D: In this school? Probably when.. Im not sure really.		
this	315.	E: Is there any times when you don't feel like that here?		
connection	316.	D: After some kind of argument perhaps yeah		
in school?	317.	E: Arguments with..?	Bad day beforehand – wider systemic influences on belonging? Something has happened before he gets to school	
	318.	D: Just somebody. Anybody. Sometimes I just have arguments because I		
	319.	can't stand anybody. Ive just had a bad day beforehand or something		
Conflict	320.			

Emergent Themes	Line	Initial Transcript – DD 1	Exploratory Comments Descriptive, *Linguistic*, <u>Conceptual</u>	Interpretation and Summarising
Wider systemic influences Role of friendships Lessons	321. 322. 323. 324. 325. 326. 327. 328. 329. 330. 331. 332. 333.	E: Okay. So that's if you've had a bad day. What would a good day be like? A day where you have felt you have really belonged? D: Met with my friends. Had a good time together. Enjoyed my lessons. Gone back home and played with some other friends or by myself if their not online. E: Okay. A good day. What about a bad day then? What would a day you don't feel like you belong look like? D: Start off with an argument with my mum. Go into school and often that causes me to get into an argument at school as well. I just start getting really mad and can argue with anybody E: Oh no. is that more likely to be with staff or another pupil or? D: Anybody really. E: Okay	Friendship a key influence on belonging. Enjoying company Lessons a key influence on belonging Role of friends outside of school – <u>online. don't need to be in close proximity.</u> <u>Transcending school context</u> How conflict at home can result in conflict at home – and this can impact on sense of belonging within this space. Not a personal argument – mad at himself/his circumstances?	He feels proximity has allowed them to grow closer, but not to the extent that they offer one another emotional support. Danny reflects wider contextual factors which can impact his sense of belonging in school. He doesn't feel he belongings if he is arguing with others; which he is
Peers not speaking to Danny Relief? Not liking frequent social interactions? Comfort in familiarity? Acquaintances vs friends Mutual toleracnce Taxi as bringing people together - proximity	334. 335. 336. 337. 338. 339. 340. 341. 342. 343. 344. 345. 346. 347. 348. 349. 350. 351. 352. 353. 354. 355. 356.	D: Often its staff though. Because pupils don't often talk to me. Which I appreciate though as I don't like constantly talking to new people or anything like that. E: Okay. So lets talk about your relationship with the other pupils. D: Well as I just said, I don't like meeting new people too much. E: Yeah D: I find it – I don't know how to explain this – I find it a lot easier just to stick with the friends I have. Because having a few good friends is a lot better than having a lot of "I just kind of know this man" kind of friends. E: Yeah. You would rather know people well and have a few close friends? D: Yeah than have 100 friends I've never really heard off like half of them before in my life. E: Yeah. So weve spoken about [peer] and you've said about the two friends you had in year 11 last year; but they've left now. Is there anyone else you would consider to be a friend? D: Umm perhaps [peer]. Me and him have to deal with another kid in the taxi who is really annoying E: Is that how you've become friends then? Through your taxi journeys? D: Yeah E: What's your relationship like in school?? D: Well almost all his time is spent in the [resource base]. I mostly talk to him in the taxi	Peers don't speak to Danny. [Whereas Conran – I don't talk to pupils, Danny is pupils don't talk to me] <u>BUT feelings of relief around this? Doesn't like it.</u> Not wanting frequent social interactions. *Use of terms such as constantly and too much imply wants some interactions but not too much.* <u>Comfort in familiarity of the friends he has already made? Easy to maintain a friendship than start a new one?</u> <u>Quality over quantity in his relationships</u> <u>Unity through mutual toleration.</u> *Having peers who annoy him and have to be dealt with*. <u>What does this entail? The role of the taxi in bringing people together. The role of the taxi also in having to travel to attend a resourced-provision school.</u> <u>Not having proximity as peer is in RB and Danny is mostly in mainstream. Different years – cant cross bubbles.</u> <u>Different friendships in different spaces. He is my friend in the taxi, but relationship changes when enter school??</u>	more likely to do following difficulties at home. Equally, friendships and relationships online can meet his need for belonging. Danny doesn't feel other students talk to him much or initiate conversation. Although he finds constant interaction hard (so is somewhat relieved about this); Danny does value interactions from people he knows. He reflects om the

Appendix N: Photography Instructions and Information Sheet

Photography Instructions

This sheet tells you about the photography task to help you remember what it is about.

I would like you to take 5-10 photos of things that tell me:

What helps you feel like you belong when you are in school?

We will have a look at the photographs you have taken when we next meet.

There are no 'right' or 'wrong' photographs but there are some things you cannot take photographs of.

You CAN:

- Take photographs of things around the school (inside and outside)
- Take photographs of yourself in the school
- Take photographs of other people as long as they have signed a consent form. I will give you some of these and explain how to use them.
- Take photographs about something I may not be able to understand until you tell me about it at the interview
- Take a photograph of something as a reminder of something you would like to talk to me about when we next meet.
- Delete photographs if you change your mind or if there is something that you don't want me to see

You CANNOT:

- Take photographs that might be offensive or inappropriate (such as someone on the toilet, body parts that are usually covered by clothes in public, something rude or that might hurt someone's feelings)
- Take photographs in lesson (unless you have the teacher's permission)
- Take photographs of people who do not want their photograph taken. Be careful who is in the background of your photographs.
- Ask other people to complete the task – I want to know about you! Although other people can take a photograph of you if you ask them to.

Other things to remember:

If the photographs you take make me concerned that you or somebody else is at risk of being harmed we will have to talk about this. I might have to take further action to make sure that you and/or other people are safe.

I would like you to complete this exercise before our next meeting on:

On that day, I will ask you to pick the 5 photographs you think are most important and we will look at them and talk about them.

Thank you – I am looking forward to seeing your photographs!

Appendix O: Optional Photograph or Object Structure Form

| Questions I have for Emily or comments from our last meeting:

•

•

•

• | The first thing I will show/tell Emily is:

_____
 This is a:

Photograph ☐   Piece of work ☐

Drawing ☐   Object ☐

Other ☐
OR
Nothing to show but I will tell her about:
_____
_____
_____
_____ | The second thing I will show/tell Emily is:

_____
 This is a:

Photograph ☐   Piece of work ☐

Drawing ☐   Object ☐

Other ☐
OR
Nothing to show but I will tell her about:
_____
_____
_____
_____ |
| The third thing I will show/tell Emily is:

_____
This is a:

Photograph ☐   Piece of work ☐

Drawing ☐   Object ☐

Other ☐
OR
Nothing to show but I will tell her about:
_____
_____
_____
_____ | The fourth thing I will show/tell Emily is:

_____
This is a:

Photograph ☐   Piece of work ☐

Drawing ☐   Object ☐

Other ☐
OR
Nothing to show but I will tell her about:
_____
_____
_____
_____ | The fifth thing I will show/tell Emily is:

_____
 This is a:

Photograph ☐   Piece of work ☐

Drawing ☐   Object ☐

Other ☐
OR
Nothing to show but I will tell her about:
_____
_____
_____
_____ |

Appendix P: Interview Schedule for Second Interview

Now, I know you prepared some photographs for our meeting today – thank you very much for taking them and bringing them in today. I asked you to select your 5 most important photos to bring with you. I thought you could show them to me and tell me a little bit about why you chose to take each photograph.

First of all I would like you to put the photographs in order. The order can be anything you want.

Tell me about the [first/second…last] photograph

	Possible questions
Descriptive	• Can you describe this photograph to me – if I closed my eyes, what would you tell me about it? • Who/what is this photograph of? • What do you do here? Who with? • What does it sound/feel/smell/look like here?
Evaluative	• Why did you choose to take this photograph? • What do you want me to understand from this photograph? • What does this photograph [i.e. the playground] mean to you? • What is important about this in school? • How does this help you feel like you belong in school?
Comparative/ contrast	• Is there anything you would change about [the subject of the photograph in YP own words]? • How is this different from [photograph 1] • How do you think these things would be if you were at a different school?
Circular (note that this relies on Theory of Mind)	• What do you think the other students would think about this?

- Can you tell me about the order you have put the photographs in
- Which photograph is most important to you? Why?
- Which photograph is least important to you? Why? How come you still chose to photograph it?
- *Is there anything you didn't get the chance to take of photograph of that you would have liked to? Tell me more about that.*

Appendix Q: Exerts from Interview 2 with Exploratory Comments and Emergent Themes - Danny

Emergent Themes	Line	Initial Transcript – DD 2	Exploratory Comments	
	1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13.	E: So, thank you again for taking these pictures over the last few weeks. That's really really helpful D: Yes E: You can put them in any order you want. So, you can pick which order we talk about them in. Then we will just go through each photograph one at a time; have a chat about it and how it links to belonging; and then at the end we might talk about all the photographs as a whole D: Yeah E: Does that sound okay? D: Yeah E: So which photograph did you want to talk about first? D: Probably this one E: Yeah? And can you describe what this is a photograph of		PHOTO 1 Danny's fist photograph is of the Year 11 room in the Hub (divided by year group due to Covid 19) Danny initially highlights the physical aspects of the room – chairs, tables and windows. Next, he positions the adults within the room.
Physicality of the environment	14. 15. 16. 17.	D: My classroom in the [rb] E: Yeah. So, what's in the photograph? D: You can see chairs; the tables; the windows; the outside. You can see the computer and where the teacher sits	Notes all the physical properties of the room first.	
Importance of the teacher?	18. 19. 20. 21. 22.	E: And what is it like in that room? D: It's quite quiet most of the time E: Yeah? D: Because the door on the side of the room. The door other than the exit. It just leads to {rb managers} office	That's important – where the teachers sits. The teacher isn't actually in the photograph but Danny puts the teacher in the room.	Danny describes the room as being quiet; although more people are walking past now due to the one-way system around the
Sensory environment – Noise	23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29.	E: So, she's right next to you then? D: Yeah E: Do you see much of her? D: Quite a lot E: What's that like? D: I don't know E: Is there anyone else you see in that room?	Quiet. Importance of a quiet environment and his sensory experiences. Is quiet a good thing or a bad thing? Does quiet mean noise or does it mean people? Role of RB manager in keeping the room quiet? Is this due to discipline? Or Reassurance that adult is nearby. Places adult in the photograph again.	school. This means the blinds are drawn which disrupt his view.
	30. 31. 32. 33. 34.	D: It's often my friend E: Yeah D: {keyworker} my main ta and [staff] E: Okay D: Yeah	Friend not classmate.	The room serves a dual purpose for Danny – both educative and social. He spends his break and lunchtimes here as he finds the
Peer friendships	35. 36.	E: So, what made you choose to take this photograph then to represent a sense of belonging?		

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Emergent Themes	Line	Initial Transcript – DD 2	Exploratory Comments	
Familiarity of space At ease, relaxed Educative space Social space Physicality of space Privacy	37. 38. 39. 40. 41. 42. 43. 44. 45. 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. 51. 52. 53. 54.	D: Because this is where I mainly sit and the place I spend most of my time at. So, I find it nice here. Relaxing you could say E: Relaxing? Okay so what do you tend to do in this room then? D: I'm either being taught; or I am hanging out with my friend E: Okay D: Yeah E: Is there anything you would change about the room? D: Sadly enough the room is a bit small. And the windows – the blinds have to be constantly shut due to the number of people who walk past due to covid. E: So what is it like having the blinds constantly shut? D: It just means I can't see outside. E: Okay yeah. What was it like in there before covid then? D: I wasn't in there before covid E: Oh no – you would have been in the year 10 classroom D: Yeah I was in year 10 at that point E: Sorry [name] – Okay. So what is important to you about having this classroom and having this space? D: I like it. Shock horror	Familiarity. A safe base. His own personal space Feels at ease and relaxed in a familiar and safe environment. Role of learning – primarily an educative space? Dual purpose – social space Physicality of space. Small. Closed blinds – dark? Sense of privacy – people walking past all the time (one way system around school now due to social distancing guidelines) so blinds closed to maintain privacy. OR is it due to wanting to see nature outside?	familiarity reassuring and this helps him to "cope". Overall, Danny notes that the room itself changes depending on whom is inside the room. What is important to him is the familiarity and sense of ease he feels whilst within this environment, and the role the physicality, adults and peers play in this.
Space as influenced by people within in Familiarity of space	55. 56. 57. 58. 59. 60. 61. 62. 63. 64. 65. 66. 67. 68. 69. 70. 71. 72.	E: Yeah. What is it you like? What is it that makes the room good for you? D: Well the room is constantly changing with people inside of it just because of lessons and all that. E: Yeah D: But it's where I mainly am during the main points of the day. Like break and lunch. So I find it a lot easier to cope in there. E: So it's your main base then? D: Yeah E: Okay. Is there anything else you want me to understand from this photograph then? D: No E: Okay. So what's the next picture you want to talk about? Ahhhh – that's a nice photograph D: I asked for her to pose for a picture but she decided to go a bit above and beyond as you can tell. E: Well she is quite the model. She's doing a great job. Can you describe what's in the picture for the recorder please?	Space not just as physicality but as influenced by those within in. the room changes because the people inside the room change. The main points – most important points of the day? Needing to cope. Familiarity makes him feel safer?	Photo 1 led to conversations of the physical environment and the people who occupy these spaces. PHOTO 2 Danny's next photo is of his keyworker.

Emergent Themes	Line	Initial Transcript – DD 2	Exploratory Comments	
	73.	D: [keyworker] my head ta and the one who is in control of the classroom. She's	*Control – connotations? Lacks autonomy?*	Danny reflects that his
	74.	decided to make a silly pose for the camera. That was her on her own accord		relationship with his
Control and compliance		and not mine		keyworker can
	75.	E: [laughs]		sometimes be
	76.	D: I never asked for her to do this		negative; but feels
	77.	E: A little disclaimer there. I like it. So what made you take a picture of		that this is quickly
	78.	[keyworker]?		resolved. He feels out
	79.	D: I decided to take a picture of [keyworker] because she is my head ta and	Relying on keyworker – trust and personal connection. Rely on her for what? Constancy and consistency.	of everyone in school,
Relying on others	80.	she's probably the one I can rely on the most		she is one person he
	81.	E: Yeah. Can you tell me about your relationship?		can rely on to
Love/hate relationship	82.	D: Sometimes we can be on bad terms but it's mainly resolved quickly. And	What do bad terms look like? Can sometimes not see eye to eye?	understand him and
	83.	she's often funny		he talk about his
Conflict resolution	84.	E: And you say you can rely on her the most?	Acknowledgement that not always perfect but that any conflict is easily resolved. Conflict resolution such an important skill.	problems to her. He
SOH	85.	D: Yeah I can tell her some of my problems and she understands.		needs to be familiar
Being listened to and understood	86.	E: That sounds really nice to have an adult in school who you have a bond with	Relationship with staff – feeling understood	with staff to do this.
	87.	D: Yeah that's definitely something I really like,		Danny also identifies
	88.	E: And do you have that relationship with anyone else in school?	Talk through difficulties. Being heard	two staff (male) in the
	89.	D: Hmm yeah quite a few teachers know me quite well.		mainstream school
	90.	E: Yeah?		with whom he has a
	91.	D: Yeah my biology teacher, my IT teacher. Those guys I definitely feel I can rely	Importance of familiarity with staff	trusting relationship.
Familiarity with staff	92.	on if necessary.		He values their
	93.	E: What can you rely on them for?	R/s with mainstream staff. Can also depend on them. *If necessary – what would make this necessary?*	relationship as they
Personal r/s – not based on work	94.	D: Talking with them. They're fun to talk with. They're really casual and not		see him as more than
	95.	always thinking about work.		just a student, but
	96.	E: So they talk to you about things outside of work?		holistically as a
	97.	D: Yeah. Like after lessons though of course. Sometimes during lesson in fact.	Valuing conversations which transcend professional boundaries into a more personal relationship? Not just work based but connecting as human beings. Personal connection	person: taking an
	98.	E: So what do you talk about?		interest in his hobbies
Shared interest with staff	99.	D: Well me and my IT teacher, well that should be a no brainer. Both of us like		and sharing their
	100.	IT		interests with him. He
	101.	E: So you can have a good conversation about that?		values their
	102.	D: Yeah		relationship as they
Staff as knowledgeable	103.	E: And what about your biology teacher?	Shared interest in computers and IT – supports conversations	see him as more than
	104.	D: He just knows a lot. He doesn't really mind what I talk about. He's always	Biology teacher as knowledgeable	just a student, but
	105.	really interested in what I do which is always a nice thing in my opinion.		holistically as a
	106.	E: Yeah definitely		person: taking an
	107.	D: He sees me as more than just exam material		interest in his hobbies
				and sharing their
				interests with him. He

Appendix R: Bringing the Themes together: Superordinate Themes, Subordinate themes and Emergent Themes for All Participants

Superordinate	Subordinate and Subthemes	Conran	Danny	Aerial	Mikey
Feeling Safe and Calm	**Environmental: sanctuary for escapism**				
	• Sensory environment • Predictability of environments. • Safe places • Relaxation and tranquillity • Time in nature • Familiar environments	Calm environments, predictability, familiarity of environment,	Behaviour, familiar environment, sensory environment, physical environment, breakaway spaces, relaxation, escapism,	Sensory refuge, predictability, safe places, relaxation, role of nature, familiarity, comfort and escapism, breakouts spaces	Large open spaces, nature, peace and solitude
	Relational safety				
	• Familiar and safe people • Consistency, availability and predictability of adult support • Absence of conflict and danger • Adherence to school rules and bullying policies	Previous experiences of conflict, absence of conflict, neutrality, Adherence to school rules, Consistency, availability and predictability of adult support, classroom management, bullying, behaviour policies	staff responsiveness to conflict, familiarity with staff, peer familiarity, behaviour, space as stage for relationships, conflict and arguments, adherence to rules, compliance	Availability consistency and predictability of adults, absence of danger, Familiar and safe people, group size	Familiar people, bullying, absence of danger, school rules
	Accepted as an ingroup member				

Feeling Accepted	• Identity as a hub attendee • Autism diagnosis • Being myself • Inclusive pronouns • Abnormality • Acceptance • Ingroup/outgroup	Ingroup/outgroup	Collective identity as capable and knowledgeable. Collective identity as not normal. Collective identity as struggling and needing help, inclusive pronouns, outgroup	Autism diagnosis, commonality	Mainstream identity over hub identity. Comparison of, safe p ingroup/outgroup on whole school basis, not knowing anything different to attending hub, single sex experiences, autism diagnosis, being myself
	Individual self				
	• Personality factors • Multiple Selves	Extroversion/introversion; open and closed, multiple selves, negative self-labels, not wanting to change to fit in, Personal responsibility to belong, wanting to change			
Feeling Accomplished	**Empowered and supported to achieve**				
	• Motivated to Learn – function of school • Empowerment • Aspirations • Skills and competencies	Motivation to learn, academic function of school, competency, importance of learning, breadth of curriculum	Learning as fun, competency, progress	Competency and skills, future aspirations and goals, enjoying learning	Competency, breadth of curriculum, motivated to learn, academics
	Recognition of effort and accomplishment				
	• Recognition and acknowledgement • Success		Recognition, success, acknowledgement	Success, recognition	Recognition of success

Feeling understood, supported and valued	**Emotionally Supported**				
	• Trust • Reliable and dependable relationships with staff • Role of the keyworker • Peer support	Someone to talk to and confide in	being understood by teacher, personal attributes of staff, reliability, people to confide in, reciprocity of care,		Trust, keyworkers
	Understood and Supported as a Learner				
	• Differentiation and individualisation • Engagement • Academic understanding and consistent support • Personal attributes of staff	Respected by staff, Consistency and predictability in staff availability Personal relationships with staff,	Less mainstream support, individualised learning and tailored support, separate teaching, pace of learning , knowledgeable staff, being understood by teachers,	Individualisation, differentiation, help from staff	Enjoying mainstream, differentiation
	Understood as a Person– I am more than just a student				
	• Holistic understanding • Me as a person • Being liked as a person		Being treated well, understanding me, holistic understanding	Knowing me as a person	Staff liking and valuing him, interests in his interests
Feeling connected	**Sense of Community within the hub**				
	• The importance of the hub • Community – shared narratives and experiences	Group size, importance of hub, shared games and activities, commonality, shared	Love/hate relationships, group banter, shared goals, collective enjoyment,	Group size, importance of hub, commonality, shared games	Shared interests, personal contribution

		Spending quality time together / collective enjoyment • Personal contribution	circumstance, shared interest	boredom, spending quality time together, shared jokes, whole school ethos, shared language, free time and structured games, importance of hub, personal contribution		
	Being known by others: Acquaintanceship vs friendship					
		• Genuine friendships • Social communication barriers • Commonality • Mutual recognition and acknowledgement • Social peripheries • Quality vs quantity • Peer tolerance	Friends vs acquaintance. Mutual recognition, familiarity, knowing people, shared interests verbal interactions, proximity to peers, Social communication barriers	Not being part of MS group, No friends in MS, peer tolerance, peer support, peer proximity, shared interests, quality over quantity, genuine friendships		Notoriety, trusting friendships
	Dynamism: Connected over time and space					
		• Permanency • Intergenerational influences and parental experiences	Belonging in other contexts, permanency, role of time in familiarity, looking to the future, transition to the hub, autonomy in decision to attend hub,	Friendships transcending place, Friendships transcending time, adjustment to change, family influences	Role of the family, keeping home and school separate	Role of wider community spaces in seeing friends, Parental experiences of belonging

	• Belonging in other contexts i.e. the family • Friendships transcending place	Changes with maturity/ time			
	Feeling disconnected				
	• Nostalgic recollection • Missing friendships • Loneliness • Choice in not belonging	Choice in belonging, not wanting friendships, social needs met elsewhere	Sense of loss, lack of connection, few friends/people in hub, loneliness, choice in social interactions	Lack of friendships	Missing old friendships, nostalgia

Superordinate	Subordinate and Combined Emergent themes	Conran	Danny	Aerial	Mikey
<u>Feeling Safe and Calm</u>	**Environmental: sanctuary for escapism**	✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Sensory environment	✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Predictability of environments.	✓	✓	✓	X
	• Safe places	X	✓	✓	X
	• Relaxation and tranquillity	✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Time in nature	X	X	✓	✓
	• Familiar environments	✓	✓	✓	X
	Relational safety	✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Familiar and safe people	✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Consistency, availability and predictability of adult support	✓	✓	✓	X
	• Absence of conflict and danger	✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Adherence to school rules and bullying policies	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Accepted as an ingroup member	✓	✓	✓	✓

		Col1	Col2	Col3	Col4
Feeling Accepted	• Identity as a hub attendee • Autism diagnosis • Being myself • Inclusive pronouns • Abnormality • Acceptance • Ingroup/outgroup	✓ X X X X X ✓	✓ X X ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ X X X X X	✓ ✓ ✓ X X ✓ ✓
	Individual self	✓	X	X	X
	• Personality factors • Multiple Selves	✓ ✓	X X	X X	X X
Feeling Accomplished	**Empowered and supported to achieve**	✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Motivated to Learn – function of school • Empowerment • Aspirations • Skills and competencies	✓ X ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓
	Recognition of effort and accomplishment	X	✓	✓	✓
	• Recognition and acknowledgement • Success	X X	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ X
Feeling understood and supported	**Emotionally Supported**	✓	✓	X	✓
	• Trusted confident • Reliable and dependable relationships with staff • Role of the keyworker • Peer support	✓ X X X	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓	X X X X	✓ X ✓ ✓
	Understood and Supported as a Learner	✓	✓	✓	✓

	• Differentiation and individualisation	✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Engagement	✓	✓	✓	X
	• Academic understanding and consistent support	✓	✓	✓	X
	• Personal attributes of staff	✓	✓	X	✓
	Understood as a Person– I am more than just a student	X	✓	✓	✓
	• Holistic understanding	X	✓	✓	✓
	• Me as a person	X	✓	✓	✓
	• Being liked as a person	X	✓	X	✓
Feeling connected	**Sense of Community within the hub**	✓	✓	✓	✓
	• The importance of the hub	✓	✓	✓	X
	• Community – shared narratives and experiences	X	✓	✓	✓
	• Spending quality time together / collective enjoyment	✓	✓	✓	X
	• Personal contribution	X	✓	X	✓
	Being known by others: Acquaintanceship vs friendship	✓	✓	X	✓
	• Genuine friendships	X	✓	X	✓
	• Social communication barriers	✓	X	X	✓
	• Commonality	✓	✓	X	✓
	• Mutual recognition and acknowledgement	✓	✓	X	X
	• Social peripheries	✓	✓	X	X
	• Quality vs quantity	✓	✓	X	X
	• Peer tolerance	✓	✓	X	X
	Dynamism: Connected over time and space	✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Permanency	✓	X	X	X
	• Intergenerational influences and parental experiences	X	X	✓	✓
	• Belonging in other contexts i.e. the family	✓	✓	✓	✓
	• Friendships transcending place	✓	✓	X	✓

Feeling disconnected	✓	✓	X	✓
• Nostalgic recollection	X	✓	X	✓
• Missing friendships	X	✓	X	✓
• Loneliness	X	✓	X	X
• Choice in not belonging	✓	✓	X	X

Appendix S: Extracts from Reflexivity Diary

Interviewing Aerial for the first time (second overall interview, second time meeting Aerial).

It was really nice to see Aerial again as he is so engaging. I'm pleased that he remembered me and was eager to participate. He commented on how his keyworker had prepared him and I feel really grateful for her support in this process as getting into school has been so difficult.

We had to sit further apart this time with a screen between us, which felt very formal and uncomfortable. I was really hoping we could have done walking interviews to take the pressure away. I tried to promote a relaxed atmosphere and we chatted about video games and some of Aerial's interests again at the start.

Aerial remembered the game we had played together during our introductory session and did seem a little distracted and wanted to play this. We negotiated that this could be played at the end of the session, although he appeared to rush through some of the questions and make frequent reference and reminders to playing the game at the end. I was also conscious of time management, as I did not want him to miss his next lesson. My own values around education and not missing this may have also caused me to rush the process.

Aerial was a lot chattier to me before I turned on the Dictaphone. I did explain the Dictaphone in detail as I wanted to be really transparent as to what Aerial was consenting to. I think I may have overegged this a bit, as he was preoccupied and kept checking the red light was still flashing. His answers to my questions were much briefer and I was unsure whether to reference previous conversations we had prior to recording as prompts.

My interview questions seemed to be less appropriate for Aerial. I often made the mistake of asking "can you tell me more about that" rather than "tell me more about that". The former typically elicited a response of "no sorry" whilst the latter resulted in further elaboration. I need to be really mindful of this in future interviews and adjust my schedule accordingly. I was also aware that I could jump in and ask the next question too quickly. I need to ensure I am giving participants space to think and process what is being said and become more comfortable with silence. I also need to be conscious not to ask 2 different questions within the same breath. I hope I get into the flow of it as the day progresses.

Although successful with Danny, Aerial seemed to be very distracted by the Lego and I did not feel this was helpful for him in exploring his conceptualisation of belonging. Aerial built a helicopter and said he had done so because he likes helicopters and hopes one belongs to him one day. More detailed conversations around the term belonging may be helpful prior to the Lego activity. I will try to facilitate this in my next interview