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An Ethnographic Study of Autistic Children's Social Experiences at School

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

Social experiences form a ubiquitous part of school life for all children, and this is no different for autistic children. Although these children have been described as having difficulties in social contexts within their school, this thesis challenges the notion that the social lives of autistic children are compromised. Autistic children included in educational settings indicate that positive social experiences are imperative for their sense of belonging and inclusion. However, the unique nature of the social needs and experiences for each child and the context within which these take place, requires intent listening to children and their specific experiences. Children's rights to be heard and for their active participation in matters that affect them, including in research, are underscored by policies and conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This study followed the social experiences of two autistic primary school-age boys within their school over two school terms. Foregrounding the two children's experiences of their social lives at school was enabled by engaging them as co-researchers. An ethnographic methodology with participatory methods grounded within this approach were used, and a Children's Research Advisory Group was consulted to facilitate children's involvement in research as partners. The participants themselves guided the data collection process, thus enabling them to share and lead their stories. The findings showed a complex and agentic picture of the autistic children's social world that included: multidimensional friendships; meaningful play; and self-determined interactions. The findings also showed that social inclusion and social exclusion can be viewed beyond a binary understanding of solely inclusion or exclusion. A relational understanding of social inclusion and exclusion is emphasised. Children's awareness of how they are perceived by their peers and their motivation to engage with their peers in ways that were significant to them, played a role in how they deliberately navigated their social world at school. The ethnographic methodological approach allowed for the promotion of children as competent rights-holders through three key aspects: (i) following the child's interests, (ii) engaging in reflexive partnership, and (iii) meaningful researcher engagement over time. Through the children's active involvement in this research, their stories emerged authentically and organically and this facilitated new understandings of autistic children's social experiences. This study invites a reconsideration of some existing conceptualisations of autistic children's social experiences and assumed ideas around labels.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Schooling experiences are typically an inherent part of childhood, and they serve as an important context for socialisation (Perez-Felkner, 2013). Children's peer relationships at school play a fundamental role in influencing their mental health and well-being (Schmidt et al., 2019; Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020), contributing to their motivation to learn (Wentzel & Muenks, 2016). This is no different for autistic children, with peer relationships playing an important role in the children's feelings of inclusion and acceptance at school (Aubineau & Blicharska, 2020; Little et al., 2022). Although the importance of peer and social experiences for children, in general, has been well documented in literature, further understanding of the lived social realities of how autistic children navigate their school environment is needed.

An exploration of autistic children's schooling and social experiences is especially important given the increasing impetus for educational inclusion. For example, in New Zealand, the Ministry of Education has emphasised the inclusion rights of all children to attend school under the Education and Training Act 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020) and "flexible support for neurodiverse children and young people" is one of the priorities identified under the Learning Support Action Plan 2019–2025 (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 11). The concept of educational inclusion continues to generate conversations and debate with regard to its definition (Nilholm & Göransson, 2017) and implementation (Kefallinou et al., 2020), including in the area of autism (Olsson & Nilholm, 2023; Pellicano et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the discourse of social participation remains a prominent component in the inclusion discussion (Bossaert et al., 2013; Mamas et al., 2021; Van Mieghem et al., 2020). Autistic children and young people have also highlighted social aspects of their experiences to be an integral part of their schooling and inclusion (Horgan et al., 2023; Lüddeckens, 2021).

Developing an authentic understanding of autistic children's social experiences is also essential because the perceptions of childhood and disability are being "reconceptualised in terms of voice, agency, competency, and rights" (Twomey & Carroll, 2018, p. 3). This is in part because of international policies, theoretical views, and social movements that have emphasised the inclusion of children's perspectives in research, and the inclusion of autistic testimony in research concerning the autistic community. Importantly, the rights outlined in the international legalisation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

(UNCRC, 1989), have been a significant catalyst in this change. Similarly, the view of children as active in the construction of their realities as propagated by theoretical perspectives such as the new sociology of childhood (Prout & James, 1997, 2015) has been influential in generating theory and debate in childhood research (Canosa & Graham, 2020) and has also emphasised the inclusion of children's direct voice and participation in research (Prout & James, 2015). Together, these evolving perspectives, influenced by both legal mandates and theoretical views, are gradually reshaping the understanding of autistic and other underrepresented children's experiences.

Autistic children were historically portrayed as incapable or unwilling to engage in social interactions, as having social impairments, and reduced social motivation (Asperger, 1991; Carter et al., 2005; Chevallier et al., 2012; Kanner, 1943). In recent years, however, there has been a shift in this narrative, as autistic individuals have debunked these notions and descriptions of themselves as disinterested in friendships and social interactions (Black et al., 2024). Even so, research on autistic children's perspectives about their social experiences at school, remains an emerging field in New Zealand and internationally and more targeted work is needed where autistic children are authentically included in research (Fayette & Bond, 2018; Horgan et al., 2023; Mamas et al., 2021; Zanuttini, 2023). Accordingly, this study explores autistic children's social experiences in their school and is grounded in a rights-informed approach guided by the UNCRC (1989). Further, this study positions autistic children as experts in their own lived realities, capable of shaping their narratives and experiences of their social relationships with peers.

1.1 Understanding Autistic Children's Experiences at School Through Research

There is a strong rationale and urgency for a study exploring autistic children's lived experiences. Pellicano and den Houting (2022) draw attention to the fact that the conceptualisation of autism remains largely framed within a medicalised lens with a focus on deficits and impairments. While in the past, a medical perspective has been valuable in advancing understanding of autism, the authors note that, despite superior autistic performance in some scientific research, "data that in fact reveal strengths in autistic people are paradoxically—and bizarrely—interpreted in a negative way, as a consequence of a *deficit* or *impairment*'' (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022, p. 382). On the other hand, as an emerging alternative paradigm, the concept of neurodiversity has been instrumental in framing autism as

a 'difference' rather than a deficit (Happé & Frith, 2020; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022), aligning with the social model of disability (Oliver et al., 2012). Concomitant with the paradigm shift towards neurodiversity, there are also increased calls for the involvement of autistic perspectives, views, and lived experiences in both guiding the research process as well as its outcomes (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). Research having practical real-world implications has also been identified as a priority by the autism community (Roche et al., 2021).

In the context of research involving children, the rights enshrined in the UNCRC (1989) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) mandates the active consideration of children's voices and perspectives. Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have a right to express their views and for their views to be taken seriously by adults, while Article 13 emphasises that children have the right to express their views through any media of the child's choosing. Importantly, researchers have argued that children's rights to have their voices heard also extends to their participation in the research process itself (Lundy et al., 2011). Further, New Zealand is a signatory to both the UNCRC and the UNCRPD, which means government agencies across the health, social science, and education sectors in New Zealand are required to consider the perspectives of children with disabilities in matters that affect them (Conder et al., 2016). Although these legalisations and policies have prompted an increase in children's participation in research, further effort is warranted to ensure that autistic children's views and voices are amplified.

Listening to autistic children's experiences is important because emerging literature has highlighted different dimensions of their experiences including findings that at times differ from, and challenge, how autism has been conceptualised traditionally. Several research studies foregrounding autistic children's experiences have shown that, contrary to conventional understandings of autism, these children desire social relationships and enjoy friendships and interactions with their peers in their school (e.g., Cunningham, 2022; Lüddeckens, 2021; Vine Foggo & Webster, 2017). Although there is research evidence that autistic children's schooling experiences can include difficulties related to the nature of the school environments, social participation, and challenges with bullying (Bailey & Baker, 2020; Horgan et al., 2023; Mamas et al., 2021), each child is unique with differing social motivations, and their experiences differ (Calder et al., 2013; Cunningham, 2022). Research has also shown that the children's lived social experiences may not always align with adult perspectives or what quantitative

examinations might suggest (de Leeuw et al., 2018; Little et al., 2022). Moreover, despite the autistic children's desires for social interactions and friendships, challenges do continue to exist in these children's schooling experiences (e.g., Cresswell et al., 2019; Goodall, 2018). Since autistic children value having friendships and positive social experiences within their schools, it is important that the social aspects of being in a school, and how the children themselves experience and conceptualise it, are explored.

Children's right to have their perspectives heard and taken seriously (i.e., Article 12, UNCRC) also extends to their participation and influence in the research process itself (Lundy et al., 2011), and it is pertinent that this is reflected in the methodological processes adopted by studies involving children. However, an increase in children's participation in research has practical and conceptual challenges (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). In research concerning autistic children, the children must be regarded as experts in their own lived experiences and be provided the opportunity to influence data collection methods so that research is respectful and meaningful to them (Scott-Barrett et al., 2023). Methodological considerations that support autistic voices and influence in the research process are important to ensure that the research has tangible and practical implications for enhancing the wellbeing of autistic people (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). As Fletcher-Watson and Happé (2019) note:

> A key component of any endeavour to improve the lives of autistic people and their allies is to engage with those communities throughout the research process. Our position is that the incorporation of autistic perspectives into research is a matter of moral principle–neatly encapsulated by the disability rights slogan *Nothing About Us Without Us*. (p. 155)

Nevertheless, "autistic people represent an essential, but surprisingly underused, source of insight into autism" (Jaswal & Akhtar, 2019, p. 2) and this argument particularly extends to autistic children in this current study context. A range of methodological processes can be used to ensure that these children's voices are heard in research. Ethnographic observations and participatory research methods have been highlighted as an approach that is beneficial in ensuring and supporting children's rights in their research participation, through guiding and influencing the research process (Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2015; Tickle, 2017). The inclusion of autistic children's perspectives and their participation in research is both valid and necessary; while these methodologies have enabled children's experiences to be understood

and captured authentically, participatory approaches that prioritise autistic children's active role and involvement in the research process, and their inputs in methodological choices require further considerations (Horgan et al., 2023; Zanuttini, 2023).

1.2 The Rationale for the Research

As a researcher and educator, my own interest in this topic derives from my previous work experiences in educational contexts, supporting and working alongside autistic children in their classrooms in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and New Zealand. In my role in the UAE, I worked with the teacher in planning and implementing the Individualised Educational Programme (IEP) for each of the six students in the classroom. The IEPs also included social support and goals for the students. Each day involved working with the children and observing them making valuable gains in both academic and social skills. However, I was also struck by the friendships I noticed amongst the children, which was in dissonance with the 'targeted social skills' in their IEP. The various instances I observed where the children voluntarily helped their classmates, sharing 'inside jokes', and yelling "see you next week!" made me reflect on the differences between what we 'think' about autistic children and their social worlds, and what transpires in reality. There was a mismatch between what I had 'learned' about autism in my education and what I was observing in their everyday school life. Over time, my evolving understanding of the varied nature of the autistic children's social interactions led me to question the mostly adult-centric approach to developing and implementing their IEPs. I wondered how support for the children might be different if we understood the children's experiences as they perceived it. My increasing awareness of this disparity between the apparent formulaic nature of the support these children are afforded, based on predominantly adult assumptions and knowledge, and the autistic children's realities provided the initial motivation for this research. I wanted to explore and understand how these children experienced their lives at school outside of the teachers' and educators' prescriptive academic and social goals.

1.3 The Present Study

This study is situated within the context of the emerging evidence in current literature, regarding autistic children's social experiences in their schools, that challenge some of the existing and historical conceptualisations of autistic sociality (Black et al., 2024; Horgan et al.,

2023). Further, this study is built on legislative obligations to support children's voices in matters that affect them, and ethical and social imperatives to ensure that autistic perspectives guide research. Research prioritising autistic children's voices has highlighted the significance of their social experiences at school. There is also an identified need in this area for further research incorporating autistic children's views and partnerships. This is important to build on, to further the growing understanding of autistic experiences, and to ensure their voices are heard to influence policy and practice both internationally and within the New Zealand context. Thus, within a rights-informed approach, the current study focuses on an understanding of autistic children's lived social realities within their school and prioritises the children's role in shaping the research narrative.

The research questions for this study are:

1. How do autistic children perceive and express their views about their social experiences at school?
2. How do autistic children interact and engage with their peers at school?
3. What role does research have in affording autistic children a voice and say in matters that affect their involvement in the research process?

1.4 Terminology Used in This Thesis

The Aotearoa New Zealand Autism Guideline uses the terms 'autistic person' and 'person on the autism spectrum' to refer to individuals who meet the criteria for a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The guideline uses the acronym ASD only when referring to an individual's clinical diagnosis or diagnostic services, and the word 'disorder' is not used (Ministry of Disabled People, 2022). The term 'disorder' has negative connotations, especially in the context of the emerging neurodiversity movement (Baron-Cohen, 2017). In the UK, autistic people have indicated a preference for the term *Autistic,* however, it is recognised that there is no "universally accepted way to describe autism" (Kenny et al., 2016, p. 12). Bottema-Beutel et al. (2021) draw attention to the fact that complete consensus regarding terminology may not be obtained "for *any* marginalized community" (p. 23), however, what is important is that stigmatising language is avoided. Drawing on the works of autistic researchers and scholars as well as works that have prioritised autistic perspectives, Bottema-Beutel et al. (2021) recommend the use of identity-first language. Similarly, in Australia, autistic adults

reported a preference for the terms *autistic, person on the autism spectrum, and autistic person* (Bury et al., 2023).

Aligning with the preferences of the broader autistic community, the children in this study are referred to using identity-first language, that is, using the term *autistic*. However, autistic children are *children* first and foremost, and so this is how they are referred to in many instances. Further, within this thesis, terms such as high functioning, low functioning, children with autism/ASD, and other terms used to describe children are used only when referring to studies that have used these terms to describe their participants. This means the studies that are reviewed are represented in the way the author(s) intended and are reflective of the different ways in which autistic individuals are referred to in the literature.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 examines literature relevant to this study. Conceptualisations of autism and the social aspects of being included in a classroom environment are discussed. Additionally, the view of children as rights holders and the importance of listening to autistic experiences are emphasised. The narratives around the school and social experiences of autistic children are explored with a focus on studies that have prioritised their voices and perspectives. The chapter concludes with a review of the methods and methodologies appropriate for researching with autistic children.

Chapter 3 involves a discussion of the methodology, associated methods, and data analysis procedures used within this study. An ethnographic methodology, and participatory methods grounded in this methodology, were adopted by this study. This chapter details the rationale and justifications underpinning the chosen methodology and methods, highlighting their alignment with the children's rights discourse. Additionally, it underscores the value of ethnography to capture authentic data reflecting children's lived experiences. The chapter also presents some considerations regarding the researcher's positionality as an adult researcher in a classroom, and how this was navigated ethically and respectfully.

Chapter 4 presents the findings regarding methodological considerations. In this chapter, the findings and discussions regarding *the children's role* within the research process, and in influencing data collection, are discussed. Tensions and ethical moments encountered

in the field are highlighted and the methodology adopted by this study is discussed as a valuable right-informed approach to understanding children's experiences. Three aspects of the ethnographic research process empowered the children's agency and facilitated their active participation in this study. These include: (i) following the child's interests, (ii) reflexive partnership, and (iii) meaningful researcher engagement over time.

Chapter 5 presents the findings regarding the different aspects of the children's social experiences in their classroom and school using vignettes. In this chapter, each child's experiences are presented separately to highlight their unique experiences. The co-constructed nature of the research, reflected in the children's active participation in the research process, meant that the narratives presented in this chapter prioritise aspects that were actively foregrounded by the children as being important to them.

The discussion in Chapter 6 interrogates the findings in the context of existing literature, employing a strength-based view to present the overarching aspects of the autistic children's social experiences. Three main themes regarding the children's social experiences are presented and discussed: (i) multidimensional friendships, (ii) meaningful play, and (iii) self-determined interactions. The chapter then discusses the children's experiences of social inclusion and exclusion in school.

In Chapter 7, the important findings and conclusions of this study are summarised, and contributions to existing research, and recommendations for further research, are presented. A key conclusion drawn from this research includes the finding that autistic children can actively construct the social world around them, and also create and sustain social learning experiences. A more sophisticated understanding of social inclusion is needed to authentically represent the children's experiences Further, autistic children are presented as having an influential role in changing the discourses around autistic experiences and autistic sociality, supported by a methodology that is fundamentally rights-informed.

Chapter 2
Literature Review

In this chapter, literature relevant to the research questions are reviewed. The review involved a systematic search in international literature in the areas of autism, autistic voices and perspectives, inclusion, and social experiences of autistic children at school. 'Discover', a Massey University database search tool, and Google Scholar, were searched for literature using keywords such as autis*, ASD, child*, student*, pupil*, voice, perspective, view, experience* social experience*, school experience*, peer relation*, inclusion, and child* rights. A further search was undertaken specific to the methodological approach using the terms autis*, child* school*, classroom, method*, ethnograph*, participatory, research method*, gather*, and facilitate*. This chapter is presented in four parts. Part one presents a consideration of how autism is conceptualised, and the influences and impacts of social inclusion on autistic children's lives. This includes research that foregrounds the voices of autistic children. In part two, the view of children as competent rights holders is discussed, highlighting the importance of listening to children. Theoretical perspectives aligning with the view of children as active constructors of their own social lives are also presented. Part three explores autistic children's experiences in school. This section includes a review of the general school experiences of autistic children followed by a review of literature on their social experiences in particular. I complete the review of autistic children's school experiences by examining their world of play within school settings. Finally, this literature review concludes with an examination of methodological considerations to understand autistic children's experiences.

2.1 Part One: Autism and Social Inclusion

Understandings of autism in childhood are evolving, and this section highlights how autism was conceptualised historically, and key changes that have occurred in the past decades. Following this, social experiences as an important part of inclusion for autistic children at school are discussed. Part one concludes with an overview of some current conceptualisations of the social dimensions of inclusion in literature.

2.1.1 Historical Overview and Current Understanding of Autism

Since first being described by Kanner (1943), and Asperger (1944/1991), conceptualisation of autism has changed and widened over the decades. Presently, autism is described as a neurodevelopmental disorder by both the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5-TR (DSR 5-TR, American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022) and the International Classification of Diseases 11 (ICD-11, World Health Organisation [WHO], 2019) characterised by "persistent difficulties with social communication and social interaction" and "restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviours, activities or interests" (APA, 2022, p. 56). In the previous versions of the DSM and the ICD (APA, 1994; WHO, 1994), the diagnosis of autism had several sub-classifications such as Asperger's syndrome, atypical autism, and pervasive developmental disorder–not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS). However, with the publications of the new versions of the diagnostic manuals, these classifications have been collapsed into a single category, 'autism spectrum'—a term initially used by Lorna Wing (Wing, 1996; Wing & Gould, 1979)—to account for the variability within the autism population (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019).

While initially considered to be a rare condition, at present it is estimated that prevalence in the western world is around 1% of the population (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019). The WHO website (2022), drawing on a world estimate study (Zeidan et al., 2022), reports that approximately 1 in 160 children are diagnosed with autism. An earlier meta-analysis by Elsabbagh et al. (2012) showed significant global variations—0.3% to 1.2%—but highlighted the need for more research on prevalence to be done in low and middle income countries. In New Zealand, a recent health survey reports prevalence for children aged 2–14 years at 2.5% (Ministry of Health, 2021). Using administrative data sources for the years 2015–2016, Bowden et al. (2020) report that 9,555 individuals (0–24 years) had an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis and the identification rate in 8-year-olds was 1 in 160. Consistent with international research (Elsabbagh et al., 2012; Maenner et al., 2020), the rate of diagnosis in males was four times that of females.

Initially, understandings of autism were firmly grounded within the medical paradigm (Evans, 2013; Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019). For instance, autism was conceptualised as an "extreme case of early-onset diminished social motivation" grounded in behavioural, biological, and evolutionary differences (Chevallier et al., 2012, p. 237). However, in the last

decade, there have been calls to replace such medical conceptualisations of autism with a neurodiversity paradigm which views autism as a natural neurodiversity that exists within the range of the human mind (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). In their review tracing the shifts in the conceptualisations in autism research, Pellicano and den Houting (2022) critique the medical model that has dominated autism research for many decades. The medical model is deficit-based and focuses on what people with autism cannot do relative to the normative standards, as opposed to their strengths and what they can do. Not only is it deficit-based, but it is also individualistic and places the emphasis for overcoming the deficit within the individual through targeted interventions or treatment (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). The medical model also leaves little scope for understanding the perspectives and life experiences of autistic people themselves as research is focused towards identifying causations and developing treatments (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022).

Reflecting on their personal experience as researchers in the field of autism research, Happé and Frith (2020) delineate changes that have occurred in the concept of autism over the last decades. Since its initial definition in 1943 by Kanner, the conception of autism had widened from a narrow diagnostic criterion, thus accounting for its increased prevalence. While previously, autism was considered as a developmental disorder with a childhood focus, it is now recognised as a lifelong condition with the concept of neurodivergence gaining in prominence, aligning with a social model of disability (Oliver et al., 2012; Shakespeare, 2016), resulting in a shift in focus from *within-person* factors to more ecological ones. Autism is now located within the neurodiversity paradigm that came into existence through the advocacy of autistic advocates such as Jim Sinclair. Coined by Judy Singer and Harvey Blume in 1998, the term neurodiversity refers to "the broad diversity that exists in human neurobiology" and the paradigm rejects the view that "divergence from the norm is a flaw requiring correcting" (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022, p. 386).

Happé and Frith (2020) state that this shift in conceptualisation, and recognition of the prominence of contextual factors means that autistic individuals' impairment may be considered as the function of the environment, that is, autistic persons may function well in certain environments while being impaired in others that are not accommodating to their needs. This means that, based on the current diagnostic criteria which require significant functional impairment, the autism diagnosis "could potentially come and go" based on the environment (Happé & Frith, 2020, p. 228). Aligning with this view, Pellicano and den Houting (2022) also

highlight that a neurotypical or normative development does not represent the correct or 'right way' of development and the emphasis is on the diversity and inherent value of the individual, as opposed to deficits in relation to the normative standards. Given that the neurodiversity paradigm recasts autism by focusing on social contextual factors and interactions and its effects on the individual, Happé and Frith (2020) speculate on a *dramatic* reconceptualisation in the future where autism may perhaps be considered as "a cognitive style or personality type " (p. 228). However, a neurodiversity stance does not negate the challenges experienced by individuals with autism and the extent of support that they and their families need (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019).

Conceptualisations of autism have therefore evolved and changed over the decades. With these shifts in conceptualisations and with the emergence of the social model and neurodiversity paradigm, the spotlight has also moved to emphasise the need for research focusing on the voices of autistic people. This is captured in the slogan of the disability rights movement—"Nothing about us, without us" (see Charlton, 1998). Changes are also reflected in the education of autistic children. For example, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) marked the turning point where 'integration' of children with disabilities in schools was replaced by 'inclusion'. The next section examines the importance of social experiences for autistic children within an inclusive context.

2.1.2 Social Experiences for Inclusion

Inclusion in literature is often portrayed as a complex and contested topic with ongoing debates on its definition, purpose, and implementation (Hansen, 2012; Kefallinou et al., 2020; Slee, 2011). Mamas et al. (2021) comment that "defining inclusion can be challenging and ambiguous, as it has been used to describe processes of access, integration, and active participation" (p. 2). Göransson and Nilholm (2014) in their review of research about inclusive education identified four different ways in which inclusion was defined in literature:

> Placement definition–inclusion as placement of pupils with disabilities/in need of special support in general education classrooms; Specified individualised definition–inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of pupils with disabilities/pupils in need of special support; General individualised definition–inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of

> all pupils; Community definition–inclusion as creation of communities with specific characteristics (which could vary between proposals). (p. 268)

In the UNCRPD (2006), inclusion is defined as access to "an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live" (Article 24, p. 17). However, there is also the argument that simply placing children in educational settings does not contribute to or guarantee their social inclusion (Mamas et al., 2021; Ochs et al., 2001; Slee, 2011; UNESCO, 2020).

While definitions and intent of inclusion may differ, social participation is considered to be an important theme in the inclusion debate (Bossaert et al., 2013). In literature, there has been a widening emphasis of inclusion, beyond just academics to also consider social inclusion. For instance, a recent meta-review of research on inclusive education reported that 8 studies out of 26 included in the review focused on the social participation of students (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). In one of the earlier influential studies that sought autistic perspectives, Humphrey and Lewis (2008) found that relationships with peers had the dual effect of being a barrier to inclusion on some occasions and an enabler on others. These findings have also been supported more recently by Aubineau and Blicharska (2020), who interviewed 26 high functioning autistic children, aged 12–16 years in France and Quebec, Canada on their experiences of inclusion. The authors reported several enablers and inhibitors to the children's inclusion; peer behaviours including bullying were reported as an inhibitor to their inclusion, whilst having a good friend in school was reported as one of the enablers to inclusion. However, it has been acknowledged that inclusion literature has often focused on appraising programmes that facilitate curriculum achievement of autistic children (Little, 2017a; Mamas et al., 2021).

The perspectives of autistic students on inclusion and their experiences in school is a growing field of research. A review by Koller et al. (2018) identified a dearth of studies that examine how children with disabilities perceive and define social inclusion, that is, what *social inclusion* means to them. However, more recent studies that have foregrounded the voices of children with disabilities, including autism, have addressed how these children perceive *inclusion*. These studies highlight that being socially included, that is, having friends, being accepted, and participating in activities, is of importance to the children themselves in the context of inclusion (Little et al., 2022; Lüddeckens, 2021). Little et al. (2022) report on three studies involving children with disabilities, including autism, that examined their perceptions

and experiences of inclusion with regard to friendship and acceptance. The studies were conducted across three different countries—Australia, Indonesia and the Netherlands. Children included in the studies were aged between 6–13 years with variations in the age group within each study. The Australian and Netherlands study used interviews and the Indonesian study used art-based methods and informal discussions. Little et al. (2022) showed that, regardless of the cultural boundaries and differing methods used, children across all three studies highlighted the importance of being accepted by peers and having at least one friend as important for their sense of social inclusion. This is concurrent with another recent review which identified that autistic adolescents perceived social participation and acceptance to be central to inclusion (Lüddeckens, 2021).

Horgan et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of studies from 2005 that explored the lived experiences of autistic young people aged 11–18 years enrolled in mainstream schools. Thirty three studies were included in the review, out of which 23 studies were from the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, followed by four studies based in Australia, two studies from the United States of America, and one each from Canada, Singapore, France, and Norway. Social participation was one of the key themes identified by the authors and within this theme, the autistic students mainly spoke about their relationships and friendships with peers, and relationships with staff members, which influenced their sense of belonging at school. The autistic young people also reported instances and concerns around bullying, indicating that the social environment was often challenging for these children and complex to navigate (Horgan et al., 2023).

The importance of social participation within an inclusive setting is also reflected in the perspectives of children in general. Black-Hawkins et al. (2022) explored the views of 56 children aged 4–11 years on their experiences of belonging and learner diversity within their classrooms in England. Conceptualising inclusion as the recognition of differences amongst *all* learners, the authors sought to understand what was important to children in the development of inclusive classroom communities. It was seen that for the children "having friends and working together" was important, and this was one of the four key interconnected findings that emerged which also included "feeling comfortable and being safe", "learning as a main activity", and "sharing values and behaviours" (pp. 586–587).

However, challenges in social experiences continue to be a reality in mainstream schooling for many children. Bailey and Baker (2020) conducted a systematic review of literature that explored factors that were most frequently experienced by autistic children that hindered their effective inclusion in the classroom. The authors focused on 48 quantitative studies, that included perspectives of the autistic students themselves, to develop an understanding of the extent to which literature was reflective of the ways in which autistic students interact with their school environment and the most frequently experienced barriers to their inclusion. The age range of children included in the studies was 5–18 years, with variations in the range within individual studies. A majority of the studies were from the United States of America (n=19) and the United Kingdom (n=14). The review also included four studies from Spain, three from Australia, three from Canada and one each from Poland, Sweden, Oman, Japan, and Taiwan. This review identified that a majority of the studies focused on exploring the social domains of autistic pupils' experiences in the mainstream classroom, followed by aspects of cognition, negative affect, and arousal. Difficulties in the areas of friendship, anxiety, and sensory facets were found to be common among the children which contributed to challenges in effective inclusion. These results pertaining to autistic children are not surprising as similar exclusionary barriers have also been observed for students experiencing a range of other difficulties. For instance, Ferreira et al. (2017) examined the social experiences of 86 preschool-aged children (3–7 years) with disabilities in Portugal. Based on sociometric reports, it was found that children with severe or sociobehavioural disabilities may be at an increased risk of being rejected and experiencing isolation.

At the same time, not all experiences described by children in inclusive settings are negative; children do experience and have described instances of positive friendships in school (Cunningham, 2022; Poon et al., 2012). However, Bailey and Barker's (2020) review identified that while difficulties associated with being in an inclusive classroom is an important area to explore, there is a prominent gap in our understanding of the positive factors and sources of enjoyment for autistic children in mainstream classrooms. In literature, the fact remains that the descriptions of school and social experiences by children with disabilities are overwhelmingly negative.

This section has shown that the social aspects of being in a classroom are an important consideration for the children themselves when it comes to their inclusive experiences. In the

next section, I discuss how the social aspects of inclusion for children with disabilities have been conceptualised in the literature.

The Social Dimensions of Inclusion. In literature, there is some ambiguity regarding how the social aspects of inclusion are defined and this is reflected in the discussion within this section. In a preliminary and influential review by Koster et al. (2009), social inclusion was conceptualised as a multidimensional concept. The literature review of 62 studies from 2000–2005 focused on the social dimensions of inclusion for elementary and preschool students with special education needs (SEN). The review found that terms such as *social integration, social participation* and *social inclusion* were used interchangeably in literature, with many studies not providing explicit definitions for the terms used. Given the lack of an unequivocal definition, Koster and colleagues espoused the term social participation, arguing that the term 'integration' was outdated and may even be associated with negative aspects of inclusion, while the term social inclusion is redundant because inclusion must logically include social aspects as well (Koster et al., 2009). Drawing on the common aspects of the reviewed studies, the authors identified four themes of social participation that included friendships/relationships, contacts/interactions, perceptions of pupil with SEN, and acceptance by classmates. They offer a preliminary definition of what they term *social participation:* "Social participation of pupils with special needs in regular education is the presence of positive social contact/interaction between these children and their classmates; acceptance of them by their classmates; social relationships/friendships between them and their classmates and the pupils' perception they are accepted by their classmates" (Koster et al., 2009, p. 135).

Bossaert et al. (2013) replicated Koster's study and extended it to secondary educational settings. The authors reviewed 19 articles published between 2000–2009. This review confirmed Koster and colleagues' findings that the terms used to describe the social dimensions of inclusion were used interchangeably, and the themes identified were almost identical to the past review (Koster et al., 2009). Bossaert and colleagues state that the definition of social participation put forth by Koster et al. (2009) was also applicable to secondary educational settings. The authors of both reviews also highlight that not every theme identified is generalisable and the experiences are likely to vary depending on the needs and preferences of each student (Bossaert et al., 2013; Koster et al., 2009).

Whilst Koster and colleagues' (2009) study focused on children identified as having special education needs, their framework has been utilised to synthesise literature on autistic children's social participation in particular. Mamas et al. (2021) used the framework to review 24 studies that explored the social participation of students with ASD in inclusive elementary and secondary schools. The included studies had self-reported aspects of social participation. It was seen that being included had resulted in both positive and negative social outcomes for the children with ASD, and these findings were similar to the experiences of children with other developmental needs. Further, inclusion was seen to be more challenging for autistic children in secondary school settings as compared to elementary school settings. Their review also identified the need for further research that elicits the voices and perspectives of autistic children's social participation and experiences (Mamas et al., 2021).

Little (2017b) presents a definition of social inclusion that is specific to autistic children: "Social inclusion for students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder can be defined as the demonstration of at least one enduring, reciprocal friendship, and self-initiated, active participation in group activities with acceptance shown by group members" (p. 17). Reflecting on previous research, Little contends that the term *social* inclusion should be retained because there is not enough literature to indicate that inclusion is more than just mere placement; and given that autistic children have unique social needs, targeted intervention is useful to support their social involvement in school.

While the themes of social inclusion identified by Koster et al. (2009) and Bossaert et al. (2013) presented above are useful for developing an understanding of the social experiences of children with disabilities in educational settings, these reviews lacked qualitative studies that specifically elicited the voices of children themselves; rather, the framework is largely based on articles that included the perspective of adults and peers. Edwards et al. (2021) sought to address this gap and explored the shared meaning of social inclusion from the perspectives of children with and without disabilities in an inclusive recreational programme. The authors conducted interviews with 17 children (eight children with disabilities–diagnosis not specified) between the ages of 8–18 with a majority being between the ages of 8–12. Following thematic analysis, the authors present three interrelated dimensions of social inclusion that were considered to be important by the children: (i) contextual dimension characterised by the freedom to choose and be equitably involved in activities, (ii) intrapersonal dimension which involves experiencing "psychological safety and group fellowship" through being a part of an

accepting atmosphere and, (iii) interpersonal dimension which encompasses "positive authentic interactions and giving/receiving help" (Edwards et al., 2021, pp. 476–479). This research, however, differed from previous conceptualisations (Bossaert et al., 2013; Koster et al., 2009) in that Edwards et al.'s (2021) study showed children did not seem to give as much value to friendship as was seen in the previous studies. However, the authors explain that this could be because the recreational setting of the study did not provide enough time for children to develop friendships owing to the short duration of the programme. The findings in the recreational study by Edwards et al. (2021) may not be ideal to generalise to other structured settings. While the study offered a preliminary conceptualisation of the social dimensions of inclusion from the perspectives of children with disabilities, there is still an imperative for further studies that elicit the perspectives of children with disabilities, including those who are autistic, on their mainstream schooling experiences as well their social experiences of inclusion (Horgan et al., 2023; Koller et al., 2018; Mamas et al., 2021).

To summarise, understandings of the social dimension of inclusion in schools and recreational settings have provided a useful point of departure to understand the social experiences of children with disabilities in schools, however, there appears to be a dearth of studies that have conceptualised or understood the lived social experiences of autistic children in educational settings. In this section, it has been highlighted that while autistic children may be placed in regular classrooms, for these young people, being accepted and socially participating with their peers is central to inclusion. Further, given the identified need to prioritise autistic voices (Horgan et al., 2023), an exploration of the children's authentic and lived experiences within their classroom is warranted. In the next section, theoretical perspectives and legislations that underline the need to elicit children's own voices on matters that are relevant to them are discussed.

2.2 Part Two: Children as Experts in Their Own Lives

The significance of this study is supported by the rights of the child, including those who experience disabilities (UNCRC, 1989; UNCRPD, 2006), in addition to legislation and policies specific to the New Zealand context. In this section, some theoretical underpinnings that support the notion of children as experts in their own lives and as active participants in the construction of their social realities are presented. Legislative imperatives around the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the United Nations Convention on

the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) are then discussed. This section concludes with a critical discussion on the importance of listening to autistic children.

2.2.1 Theoretical Perspectives

Two theoretical paradigms are relevant to this study—disabled children's childhood studies (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014), and the new sociology of childhood (Prout & James, 2015). The new sociology of childhood was initially developed by Prout and James (1997). This paradigm views childhood as a social construction, with a variety of childhood inherent in cultural settings, "rather than a single and universal phenomenon" (Prout & James, 2015, p. 7). Additionally, the paradigm emphasises that:

> Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults; Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes. (Prout & James, 2015, p. 7)

The paradigm of disabled children's childhood studies (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014) calls for research to be emancipatory, where children are involved in the decision-making process in research that explores their lives. Curran and Runswick-Cole (2014) discuss disabled children's childhood studies as a distinct approach to inquiry, drawing on the new sociology of childhood (Prout & James, 2015) and disability studies while extending beyond a combination of the two.

Historically, disabled children have been absent from studies of childhood even after the concept of childhood as a distinct notion and stage of life emerged. However, calls for equality and representation of disabled children's voices and experiences emerged through policies such as the UNCRPD (2006) and also through theories in the form of the new sociology of childhood. This marked a shift in research about children to research *with* children while critiquing dialogues around 'normal' and 'standard' norms (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014). The disabled children's childhood studies is emancipatory and embedded in three premises:

i. The approach focuses on shifting the narrative away from deficit and tragic conceptualisations of disabled children that have so far consumed studies of disabled children; instead this approach encourages a re-look outside of a normative lens, and at the complex relationships of family, friendships, daily lives, home and school contexts;
ii. It also takes an approach to research where children's voices and experiences take centre stage while acknowledging and constantly and continually re-negotiating ethical risks that come with it;
iii. This approach strives for change by moving beyond and critiquing the dominance of the 'normative' standard (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014).

2.2.2 Children as Rights Holders: More Than Voice

The UNCRC was considered a "landmark document—the first to underscore the fact that children, as rights holders, also enjoy a full range of civil and political rights" (Lundy, 2019, p. 597). The view of research *with* children rather than research *on* children has been greatly influenced by the propagation of the notion of listening to children as outlined in the UNCRC Article 12 (1989) which is also the most commonly cited in research. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that children have the right to express their views freely, and to be taken seriously by adults.

Despite a significant increase in research methods that cite Article 12, in her seminal piece, 'Voice is not enough', Lundy (2007) states that it is also vastly misconstrued. Lundy argues that the terms that are constantly equated to Article 12 in research, such as 'pupil voice' and 'right to be heard' dilute the full significance of what Article 12 stands for. In response to this concern, Lundy (2007) proposed a model that underscored four key aspects that need to be considered for the successful implementation of Article 12: "(a) space: children must be given the opportunity to express a view in a space that is safe and inclusive, (b) voice: children must be facilitated to express their views, (c) audience: the view must be listened to, and (d) influence: the view must be acted upon as appropriate" (p. 933). Further, she asserts that Article 12 is "not the only piece of the puzzle" (Lundy, 2019, p. 597) and needs to be considered alongside other UNCRC provisions, in particular, non-discrimination (Article 2), best interest (Article 3), guidance from adults (Article 5) and other participation rights (Article 13–17) (Lundy, 2007). Recently, Carroll and Twomey (2021) explored the methods used to facilitate

the participation of children with neurodevelopmental disorders in research. The authors conducted a scoping review and also indicated how the included studies reflected Lundy's (2007) framework. They highlighted that the included studies sought to support space, voice, and audience for children through methodological variations and concluded that:

> Researchers need to review the relationship of their research with Lundy's (2007) framework but also reflect on Tisdall's (2018) recommendations as to 'how' we can include children as advisers, consultants and experts as innovatively as possible in research concerning their lives as active citizens. (Carroll & Twomey, 2021, p. 721)

When it comes to the rights of children with disabilities, Article 2 (non-discrimination) and Article 23 (children with disabilities) are of particular relevance. As per UNCRC (1989) Article 2, Article 12 must be secured for every child without discrimination, while Article 23(1) states that "a disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community"(p. 9). Furthermore, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2007) has emphasised the need to guarantee the participation and inclusion of children with disabilities in matters that affect them, recognising the fact that these children continue to face social, cultural, and other physical barriers that hinder the fulfilment of their rights. Despite this, the UNCRC has also been suggested to be in line with a medicalised deficit-based approach when it comes to children who experience disabilities (Byrne, 2012).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) has been recognised for shifting the focus from a deficit conceptualisation onto a social model of disability (Byrne, 2012). The UNCRPD Article 7(3) extends the rights laid down by the UNCRC Article 12 to children with disabilities and states that:

> Children with disabilities have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity, on an equal basis with other children, and to be provided with disability and age-appropriate assistance to realize that right. (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006, p. 8)

However, it appears that there are still challenges associated with the implementation of this right in research and this is also evidenced by a dearth of perspectives of autistic children in existing literature. By convention, UNCRC Article 12 *assures* children the right to express their views and this calls for active measures to encourage and include their input (Lundy, 2007).

New Zealand is a signatory to both the UNCRC and the UNCRPD and therefore, government agencies are required to report on how the perspectives of children with disabilities are taken into account (Conder et al., 2016). There is also legislation to ensure children's views are considered through the Children's and Young People's Well-being Act (1989; Amended 2021). Section 5(a) of the Act notes:

> A child or young person must be encouraged and assisted, wherever practicable, to participate in and express their views about any proceeding, process, or decision affecting them, and their views should be taken into account. (Oranga Tamariki: Ministry for Children, 2021, p. 42)

However, The Children's Convention Monitoring Group (2019), which monitors the New Zealand government's implementation of the UNCRC, highlighted the UN Committee's observations in 2011 and 2016 that children's views were not adequately considered and respected in New Zealand when it comes to policy and practice. However, the Convention Monitoring Group acknowledges that more efforts are being made to consider children's views, though the changes are slow in coming. In the next section, I discuss the importance of listening to children to understand their experiences and the importance of involving autistic individuals in the research process.

2.2.3 Importance of Listening to Autistic Children

An examination of the current literature indicates that more research is needed that focuses on the lived experiences of autistic young people. Regardless of the rights laid down by the UNCRC (1989) and the UNCRPD (2006), when it comes to the learning and school experiences of autistic children, a large body of literature appears to have explored the perspectives of key stakeholders such as parents and educators. For instance, in a review of eight qualitative studies that looked at the experiences of young people with a diagnosis of

Asperger's syndrome, McLaughlin and Rafferty (2014) argue that some studies that sought student perspectives along with the perspectives of stakeholders prioritised the voices of adults over those of the students. Further, only two of the eight studies focused exclusively on the autistic young people's perspective (McLaughlin & Rafferty, 2014). More recently, Horgan et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of autistic young people's mainstream experiences and also identified that a majority of the included studies were multi-informant research that prioritised adult stakeholder voices. Milton (2012; 2014), an autistic researcher, has questioned the reliability of the knowledge base that has been garnered from the non-autistic perspectives and appeals for more autistic people to be involved in research to ensure its relevance for them.

Pellicano et al. (2019) argue that an important way to ensure that autistic perspectives are considered is by challenging the research model itself and involving autistic people in research as more than just participants. This argument has also been supported by other researchers (Holt et al., 2022; Jaswal & Akhtar, 2019). Prioritising autistic perspectives and experiences is important because this has been instrumental in challenging some deficit views of autism (e.g., Black et al., 2024). Jaswal and Akhtar (2019) initiated an important conversation aimed at challenging assumptions and misinterpretations about autistic behaviour—specifically, that certain behaviours, for instance, low level of eye contact, or stereotypic movements, always indicate a lack or deficit in social interest. In addition to offering alternative explanations for these behaviours, Jaswal and Akhtar (2019) along with other researchers (Friedner, 2019; Kapp et al., 2019), highlighted the fact that the assumptions about lack of social interest are negated by autistic testimony and appeal for psychological scientists to take autistic people's views and experiences seriously.

Explorations of autistic 'insider perspectives' have also offered challenges to theories that attempt to explain the social and communication difficulties associated with autism. For example, Holt et al. (2022) explored the Theory of Mind deficit framework by conducting a thematic analysis of 40 blog articles written by autistic authors. Theory of Mind (ToM) refers to the ability to attribute mental states to others, which may be different from one's own, and it has been argued that autistic children have impaired ToM (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). However, Holt and colleagues' (2022) exploration of the blogs revealed that the autistic authors were empathetic and showed awareness of social conventions. They highlighted the contradictions and critiques of ToM perspectives offered by the blogs, and the harmful effects of propagating stereotypes stemming from ToM deficit understandings. Holt et al. (2022) argue

that autistic perspectives in research must be prioritised, along with methodological considerations that align with autistic strengths and needs.

Previously, I highlighted that autistic children value social participation and experiences in their schools, however inclusion of their perspectives in research is still in its infancy. Goodall (2020b) draws attention to the fact that this is even more so within a rights-informed approach. The dearth of research involving autistic children could be due to the perceived methodological challenges associated with eliciting their voice such as difficulties with social communication (Ellis, 2017). However, evidence tells us that it is possible to include the perspectives of these children who have been continually marginalised even if they have significant communication challenges (Ellis, 2017; Hill et al., 2016).

The need to consider the perspectives of autistic children is also supported by the argument that the social needs and experiences are unique to each child. For instance, in recent studies that have elicited the voices of autistic children, many of them have expressed their desire for friendships and social engagement. However, this desire to socialise cannot be generalised to all autistic children, as some prefer being alone and playing by themselves at times (Calder et al., 2013; Cunningham, 2022; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019). As Jaswal and Akhtar (2019) emphasised, autistic individuals are no different from others in the diversity and variations in their levels of social motivation and action. Calder et al. (2013) suggest that listening and working collaboratively with autistic young people will encourage a "genuine inclusive environment" (p. 313). Other researchers have also emphasised the importance of listening to children's own perspectives when interpreting quantitative data as children's experiences and perceptions of social inclusion may differ from adult perceptions of their experiences as well as what objective data in quantitative studies might suggest (Charles & Haines, 2014; de Leeuw et al., 2018; Little et al., 2022).

Koller et al. (2018) argue that gaps in our understanding of children's experiences can hinder the development of evidence-based practices and suggest that inclusive educational interventions may not reflect or cater to how the social worlds of schools are experienced. The perspectives of students themselves will therefore better inform the implementation of structures in schools or highlight ones that are already in place to socially support the children. Little et al. (2022) states that, "to enable a space for students' influence on social inclusion and effectively address social inclusion, the perspectives of students should be explored" (p. 2076).

Understanding students' perspectives about the challenges they face in their daily experiences is essential for effective schooling for autistic children and it has been identified as an urgent focus for research (Pellicano et al., 2018).

In New Zealand, studies examining the school and social experiences of autistic children from their perspective is an emerging area. For instance, Basel and Hamilton (2019) report on the narrative of a high school boy with autism in New Zealand, about his transition to high school, classroom learning, and peer relationship experiences. The narrative revealed his strong desire for friendships but also the fact that he struggled with friendship experiences, the importance of routines and structures to support his experiences, and the behavioural expectations placed by the school as a factor that hindered his ability to make friends. The student also remarked on teaching practices and peer behaviours that obstruct his learning experiences. Basel and Hamilton (2019) highlighted that students with ASD "are being asked to draw upon continuous amounts of resilience and determination to participate well in school life" (p. 22). Some other studies in New Zealand have elicited the voices of children with other disabilities. For instance, Gaffney (2019) explored the peer and friendship experiences of an 11-year-old student with memory impairment using an ethnographic case study. The findings of this study showed that having friends was an important part of school for the participant and peer relations form an essential part of the learning experiences in a classroom.

To summarise, this section has highlighted that the perspectives of autistic children and young people in research is of importance, but it is still a growing field internationally and in New Zealand. Several researchers have called for more autistic involvement in research, and for their perspectives to be considered seriously. It is imperative to encourage a "genuine inclusive environment," by listening to and working collaboratively with autistic young people (Calder et al., 2013, p. 313). The low number of studies from the perspectives of autistic children and young people about their lived social experiences thus prompts the importance of ensuring their voices are heard and their experiences foregrounded.

2.3 Part Three: School Worlds

This section foregrounds literature specifically pertaining to how autistic children experience their lives at school. The conceptual themes and subthemes around the social inclusion of children discussed previously (Bossaert et al., 2013; Edwards et al., 2021; Koster

et al., 2009) are evident in the existing literature on the social experiences of autistic children. The first section introduces children's experiences at school in general, followed by a focus on literature that have specifically explored social aspects, recognising that there is much overlap between the two. Finally, literature around autistic children's play at school is reviewed.

2.3.1 Life at School: Perspectives of Autistic Children

In some of the earlier studies, the deficit views of autism are evident in discussions of children's experiences at school. For instance, Carrington and Graham (2001) elicited the perspectives of two 13-year-old boys with autism and their mothers about their experiences in a school in Australia. The findings were discussed in relation to the developmental differences and problems associated with Asperger's syndrome. The young boys in the study described the stress they experienced in school and the difficulties in forming relationships with their peers which was reiterated by their respective mothers. The two boys also described feelings of 'not fitting in' and constantly engaging in attempts to mask their deficits.

Over the years, studies have focused on the lived experiences of autistic young people. The perspectives of 20 pupils aged 11–17 years with Asperger's syndrome about their experiences in a mainstream secondary school was explored by Humphrey and Lewis (2008) in the UK, which has become a seminal piece of work. Participants in this study expressed their notion of "being different" and "not normal" (p. 31) and the authors argue that these negative perceptions of themselves are likely to have been constructed from the feedback they received from others. Conversely, a subset of students within the same study accepted and even celebrated their differences and credited their friends with this acceptance. Nevertheless, the accounts are mostly interspersed with negative experiences related to elevated levels of stress and anxiety as a result of the bustle and chaos of the school environment, difficulties in peer relationships and experience of physical and verbal bullying. Humphrey and Lewis (2008) suggest that the social naivety of children with autism is exploited by peers who deride the eagerness of the participants to make friends, which is often unsuccessful due to their lack of awareness of social nuances. The participants also commented on the negative aspect of additional adult support they received in the classrooms, which hindered their ability to blend in with their peers. Similar findings have also been reported in Australia (Saggers, 2015; Saggers et al., 2012).

Saggers (2015) draws a direct comparison to the themes in Humphrey and Lewis's (2008) study. In the exploration of the educational experiences of nine high school students with autism, Saggers found that negative peer experiences such as bullying were prevalent. On the other hand, some positive experiences of friendships acted as enablers for the social inclusion of the participants. The students in this study also discussed issues of stress related to the school's environment and experiences with additional support received from staff. While many students vocalised appreciation for the support provided by specialist staff, they also expressed the desire for the support to be provided more discreetly so that the students receiving additional support did not stand out.

Peer experiences appear to dominate the perspectives of autistic students in explorations of their school experiences. These related to how they were perceived by peers, desire to have friends, and negative interactions with peers. For example, in Singapore, Poon et al. (2012) explored the perspectives of four high functioning students (aged 12–17 years) with autism about their secondary school experiences. Consistent with previous findings (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008), the positive and negative perceptions of themselves were based on how they were perceived by peers. The students also described what ideal friendships would look like. For example, one participant in the study stated, "I think friends should be who they are, helping one another change, being true to who you are, honest and so [on]" (p. 1076). The students reported having positive friendships, but also had negative peer interactions such as bullying. The authors note that the mismatch between perceptions of friendship ideals by autistic students, their expressed desire for friendships and their actual relationship quality had the potential to result in mental health difficulties.

Similar challenges around peer experiences, especially with regard to how approaches by peers are perceived, were also reflected in other studies. For example, a participant in a study by Hill (2014) expressed strong desires to cultivate friendships but found it difficult to differentiate sincere approaches by his peers from apparent bullying; his vulnerabilities and difficulties in understanding social nuances being susceptible to exploitation by his peers. This is similar to the experiences reported by Humphrey and Lewis (2008). This study by Hill (2014), conducted in England, used photo-elicitation to explore the mainstream secondary school experiences of six young people with autism spectrum disorder. The young people in this study also described their anxiety caused by the school environment, curriculum, and social factors. Hill (2014) also reported on individual differences in the levels of social contact and

participation that were desired by the students with autism and highlighted the fact that having a common diagnosis does not imply similar or same needs for everyone.

In another study by McLaughlin and Rafferty (2014), six high school participants with a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome spoke about what school life was like for them. The author identifies the participants as being in years 10–13. Many participants expressed their desire to be treated 'normally' like the rest of their peers, in addition to the frustration of not 'fitting in' with their peers. They felt isolated, lonely, rejected and bullied. However, a few of them had friends who accepted them for who they were. Further, there was also a strong discourse of the negative social impact of having a teaching assistant to support them in classrooms, with one of the participants explaining that having a teaching assistant thwarted her social integration. The school experiences described by the students in this study correlate with earlier studies by Humphrey and Lewis (2008) and Saggers (2015).

In addition to peer experiences, autistic students have also highlighted challenges associated with the school contexts and environments. Goodall (2018) explored the mainstream educational experiences of 12 autistic young people aged 11–17 years in the UK. Goodall included young people's voices through a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) that advised the researchers on aspects of their educational experiences to shape the research focus and also the methods that were used. Participants in this study spoke about difficulties such as sensory overload and anxiety arising from the intense social nature of schools. Several of them spoke about loneliness, bullying and rejection, but also expressed the desire to have friends, with one participant in the study stating, "Despite making efforts to be friendly with the ones in my class, I was always left out" (Goodall, 2018, p. 8). In addition to social isolation, students also described being physically isolated by certain teaching practices such as being made to stay back during break time to catch up on work which further prevented opportunities for them to interact with peers.

Given that a majority of the studies were focused on the experiences of secondary school students, Cunningham (2022) explored the views of 11 primary aged autistic children in the UK on their perspective of an autistic friendly primary school. The authors used a participatory method specifically developed for the study and semi-structured interviews. Contrary to the negative experiences voiced by older students with autism in studies reviewed earlier, the primary aged pupils in this study largely described positive school experiences

including friendships. These results are concurrent with a review by Mamas et al. (2021) on autistic children's social participation in schools, which identified that social participation difficulties were more prominent in secondary school for these children. Nevertheless, in Cunningham's (2022) study, some children also expressed that they were content being by themselves. The children also reported a lack of understanding regarding autism amongst some teachers and peers, feeling anxious at school, and the need for awareness around autism. They also suggested that some supports that are in place, such as having access to a safe space within the school, are discretely handled or hidden from their peers (Cunningham, 2022). This was similar to the experiences of high school autistic students reported by Saggers (2015).

Warren et al. (2021) used a "storyboard method" (p. 806) co-developed with the teachers to explore the everyday experiences of five autistic children aged 9–11 attending a resourced provision in a mainstream school. Children created a poster representing their experiences of different parts of the day at the school, their emotions, their preferences and so on. This was followed by conversations with the children about their posters. A semi-structured interview was also conducted with the staff. The resource base was seen as providing a supportive environment for the children, by staff members and the participants themselves. As with previous studies, structure and routine were valued by both staff and autistic students. Difficulties with communication with peers in the mainstream setting and experience of loneliness were also described by the participants, however, all participants also indicated having several friends, mostly within the resourced provision base, and positive experiences with friendship. Interestingly, as opposed to several studies that have highlighted the positive impact inclusion has on children's social skills (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Koster et al., 2009), the authors of this study drew attention to a perceived downside of inclusion—specifically, the disruptive behaviours of peers in mainstream classes were a concern for the autistic children and something that they struggled with in the classrooms.

Notably, most studies discussed above either focused solely on male participants or had very few female participants. The few studies that have looked at the perspectives of girls have reported experiences that were similar to boys such as experiencing anxiety towards the school environment, having a desire for friendships but lacking skills to establish and maintain them, and experiences of bullying, rejection, and isolation. Some key differences were also observed, the most notable being that girls tend to mask their challenges (Cook et al., 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2019). Moyse and Porter (2015) used ethnographic observations and interviews to

explore the experiences of the 'hidden curriculum', that is, implicit social knowledge that is expected to be known, of three autistic girls (11–7 years) in a school. This hidden curriculum was seen to operate in different areas such as class rules, collaborative teamwork, and interaction with peers. The girls in this study expressed loneliness and feeling of isolation in school. Further, for one of the girls, perceptions about school were directly related to the quality of peer interactions, most of which were negative.

Tomlinson et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review of the educational experiences of autistic girls. The age of the participants in the included studies ranged from 5 to 50+, as studies where adult participants reflected on their school experiences were also included. Four of the studies were conducted in the UK, two were from Australia and the remaining were from the USA. Eight papers published between 2014 and 2018 were included. The findings highlighted a range of experiences for the participants. Difficulties with friendships, social isolation, and bullying were common in the studies reviewed, in addition to difficulties in the classroom environment. In their review, the authors note that the tendency among girls to 'masquerade' (i.e., use compensatory strategies) can lead to the minimisation of challenges they experience. Tomlinson and colleagues also highlighted challenges faced by the participants in the school environment due to variations in sensory needs. It was also recognised that autistic girls desire friendships but these are often unfulfilled. An exception to this trend was seen in a study by Vine Foggo and Webster (2017) in Australia where autistic female adolescents aged 13–17, enrolled in a mainstream secondary school, expressed a desire for, and also enjoyed close friendships. The participants in this study reported that socialisation was difficult at times, but they were able to successfully manage these difficulties. They often did this by managing their stress when they were alone. The participants also considered social interactions, and friendships, as being important to them (Vine Foggo & Webster, 2017).

Taken together, there were some common themes in research that explored the general school experiences of autistic children and young people. These include: (i) difficulties with the school environment, (ii) challenges relating to the additional specialist support provided in school, (iii) peers influencing perceptions of self, (iv) perceptions about, and value of friendships, and (v) difficulties in social interactions with peers including bullying. This section showed that relationships with peers was a prominent theme when autistic children shared their school experiences. The next section includes studies that have explored these children's social experiences.

2.3.2 Social Experiences of Autistic Children: Peer Interactions and Friendships

This section explores the social experiences of autistic children and adolescents with a focus on both quantitative and qualitative literature, and also builds on their school experiences detailed in the previous section. Although this review primarily focuses on studies that have considered the perspectives and personal accounts of the children regarding their lived experience, quantitative studies that explored the social aspects of inclusion are also considered, especially in relation to children's social networks, to develop a comprehensive understanding of autistic children's social experiences at school. Peer relationships of children can broadly be classified into the interrelated aspects of social interactions and social relationships (Bauminger-Zviely, 2013). This section will first discuss the social interactions of autistic children that have been mainly explored using sociometric methods, followed by qualitative explorations of their peer relationships and friendships at school.

Over the last two decades, quantitative studies have explored social networks and friendship groups of autistic children in educational settings, using various sociometric techniques. In general, sociometric methods refer to the statistical techniques that are employed to explore positive and negative relationships between people in a group (Cillessen, 2020). The reviewed studies have mainly used the peer nomination methods initially developed by Moreno (1934) or social cognitive mapping techniques (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Cairns et al., 1990). The peer nomination method determines children's 'social status' or popularity by asking participating children to nominate a certain number of peers who meet a particular sociometric criterion (e.g., three peers you play with), which are subsequently totalled (Avramidis et al., 2017). On the other hand, social cognitive mapping methods consider children as expert observers of the social groups among peers in their classroom, and ask the questions "Are there any pupils in your class who hang around together a lot? Who are they?", thus gathering information beyond the child's immediate social cluster (Avramidis et al., 2017, p. 70). This yields information about the centrality of the child within a cluster and the centrality of the cluster within the classroom. The social network centrality can be at four levels: isolated, peripheral, secondary, and nuclear. A child has a nuclear status when they are nominated at a high frequency within their social cluster while isolated centrality refers to children who are not identified as part of any social cluster. Children with a secondary status receive nomination at an average frequency while those with peripheral status are nominated at a lower frequency in their social cluster. These levels are also dependent on the centrality of the social cluster

itself relative to other clusters in the classroom (Farmer & Rodkin, 1996). These sociometric methods are sometimes used in combination with other measures such as the Asher Loneliness Scale (Asher & Dodge, 1986) and Bukowski's Friendship Quality (Bukowski et al., 1994), along with teacher and parent reports.

In one of the earlier studies utilising sociometric methods, Chamberlain et al. (2007) examined the social involvement of 398 children with high functioning autism or Asperger's syndrome aged 7–11 years, in a regular classroom in the USA. Using social network methods and peer nominations, the results indicated that children with autism had lower social network centrality, friendship reciprocity and companionship. Further, qualitative data was collected via observations of the classroom and parent reports. A notable theme that emerged was the importance of parent and teacher support, as well as peer support for successful social integration of the children with autism.

Similarly, Kasari et al. (2011) compared the social networks and friendships of 60 high functioning children with ASD, aged 6–11 years, to a matched peer group (chosen from a total sample of 815 peers participating in the study) across 30 schools in the USA. The study found that children with autism were more often on the periphery of social networks, had fewer reciprocal friendships and reported poorer friendship quality. Further, playground observations of the children using a timed behaviour coding system, Playground Observation of Peer Engagement (POPE, Kasari et al., 2005), revealed that they were less engaged than their peers. Similar observations have also been made by Locke et al. (2016) who reported that children with ASD, aged 5–12 years, spent more time engaged in solitary play as compared to their peers. They also spent less time jointly engaged with peers in activities. Kasari et al. (2011) found no association between playground engagement and social status within the classroom, that is, irrespective of whether the child was popular or isolated, they were less likely to be engaged in the playground as compared to their peers. This extended also to those children with autism who had reciprocal friendships in the classroom. The authors highlight that this may be due to potential contextual issues in the playground such as the noisy and chaotic environment. However, conversely, in a more recent study, Santillan et al. (2019) reported that children with ASD who are more included in their classroom social networks also spent more time engaged with peers in the playground. The participants of this study were 55 children with ASD aged 5–10 years from 16 schools in the USA. Similar to the study by Kasari et al. (2011) the authors used POPE (Kasari et al., 2005) and friendship surveys. Santillan et al. (2019) state

that the contradictory findings may be due to differences in the regions within the USA where the studies were conducted and different school policies and practices.

In the two studies discussed above (Chamberlain et al., 2007; Kasari et al., 2011), some children were prominent within the social circles in the classroom and had reciprocal friendships. For instance, in the study by Kasari et al. (2011), a few children with ASD had a high social network status and reciprocal friendships. However, the authors do not explain why some children were more successful in terms of their social networks and friendships. In another study, Locke et al. (2017) examined the characteristics of elementary school aged children (n=148) with autism who enjoyed high centrality and reciprocity in their peer engagement, that is, "socially successful" children (p. 94), and found that the severity of autism symptoms and peer connections were related to success in playground engagement and social network; those with low symptom severity and more number of peer connections experienced better peer engagement.

Interestingly, the participants in the study by Chamberlain et al. (2007), despite lower peer acceptance, did not report greater loneliness than their peers which contradicts earlier findings by Bauminger and Kasari (2000) and Bauminger et al. (2003) in a similar age group. In these earlier studies, it was reported that high functioning children with autism between the ages of 8–17 years were lonelier when compared to their peers and had poorer friendship quality despite showing high levels of social initiation. Bauminger et al. (2003) discuss that students with autism do desire social interactions with their peers, as indicated by the lower frequency and quality of interaction, and higher reported loneliness, but they may not have the necessary skills or knowledge to do so. Chamberlain et al. (2007) offer several explanations for this discrepancy. The authors argue that loneliness in these young children may arise from a mismatch in the desire for, and perception of, reciprocal friendships and provide three possibilities for a lack of mismatch that may have resulted in low levels of reported loneliness. It could be possible that autistic children were unaware that they were not being selected by their peers in which case there was no mismatch between desire and perception. A second possibility is that the children did not care that they were not selected and finally, the authors suggest that it may be that these children belonged to a group of some kind and therefore, there is less mismatch.

Similar findings regarding the social involvement of children with autism have also been observed in younger children. Rotheram-Fuller et al. (2010) examined the social involvement of 79 children with autism through grades 1–5 in the USA. The authors reported that overall, children with autism in this age group were less accepted and had fewer reciprocal friendships and were more likely to be peripheral or isolated within the social networks in the classroom, than matched peers. It also appeared that children were more socially included by their peers in earlier grades than later grades; in lower grades, comparable friendship rates were reported for children with ASD and their typical peers, but in higher grades, children with ASD had much lower levels of reciprocal friendships as compared to their typically developing classmates. Furthermore, less than half of the children with autism (48.1%) in this study were socially involved and they had a secondary or nuclear status within the social group, but this was significantly lower when compared to their peers (91.1% enjoyed nuclear or secondary status within the group). The authors did not identify any demographic variables that separated the children with autism who enjoyed nuclear or secondary status within their peer group from children who did not. However, the overall evidence that elementary school aged children with autism are less accepted and included than their peers in a classroom is in contradiction to an earlier study by Boutot and Bryant (2005) in the USA, who examined the social integration of 177 children with autism in grades 2–5 and found that these children were as accepted, visible, and members of peer groups as their peers in the classroom.

Autistic adolescents also experienced more loneliness, poorer friendship quality, and less acceptance by their peers as compared to their peers. Utilising a friendship survey, a loneliness scale, a friendship quality scale and a school activity questionnaire, in a study by Locke et al. (2010), seven adolescents with autism in a school drama class in the USA reported significantly poorer friendship quality and more loneliness than their peers. Similar results were also revealed in Taiwan. Chang et al. (2019) compared the friendship quality, activity participation and emotional well-being of 101 adolescents with autism to that of their peers by using self-administered questionnaires. The results indicated that adolescents with autism had significantly lower levels of friendship quality and school participation as well as higher levels of anxiety and loneliness as compared to their peers. A more recent study by Matthews et al. (2020) in the USA further confirmed these findings. This study looked at the social relationships of 10 high school students using peer nomination methods and indicated that the students with autism perceived themselves to have more friends than they actually did and were less accepted by their peers.

Overall, quantitative explorations of autistic children's social engagement in classrooms have yielded mixed results. While being rigorous, these studies tell us about the social relationships in numbers, however, cannot shed light on the quality or other aspects involved in the formation of these relationships (Mamas et al., 2021). Thus, while quantitative studies have offered useful insights into autistic children's positions in relation to their peers within their classroom and the connections that they have, it is imperative that the personal accounts and voices of autistic children are elicited and included in research. This is so that an authentic understanding of their experiences is developed given that having friends and being accepted by their peers form a significant part of their sense of inclusion. As Conn (2014) writes, "friendship is a particularly important and sensitive component of children's construction of social identities" (p. 82).

Bottema-Beutel et al. (2019) argue that friendship expectations, that is, the characteristics expected in a friend, have been used as a framework to conceptualise friendships in typically developing children, however, there is sparse research in this area when it comes to autistic children. In response, Bottema-Beutel and colleagues explored friendship expectations in 20 children with ASD in Grades 3–5 (aged 8–11 years) and compared this to the expectations of mental age matched typically developing peers in a study conducted in the USA. Along with other quantitative questionnaires, the Children's Friendship Expectations Questionnaire (MacEvoy et al., 2016) was used which consisted of 12 items relating to friendship characteristics that could be categorised into reliability/trust, kindness/caring, help/reciprocity, togetherness/amusement, and intimacy/disclosure. Participants had to indicate the extent to which they believed a friend should possess a particular characteristic. Overall, the findings showed that children with ASD endorsed similar expectations in a friend as compared to their peer group. However, the two groups seemed to differ on one criterion—"expressing care"—which was rated significantly higher by children with ASD. Although the evidence is preliminary, the authors argue that "Children with ASD may understand important aspects about friendships in ways similar to their TD peers… This finding is counter to current assumptions that children with ASD experience fewer friendships because they do not have an adequate conceptualization of friendships" (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2019, p. 4351).

In the UK, Calder et al. (2013) explored what friendships mean to 12 cognitively abled children with autism aged 9–11 years using self-report measures, observations and semi-structured interviews with children, their parents, and teachers. Children in this study did not

appear to be socially isolated, however, there was considerable variability in the degree of social inclusion. The majority of the children described friendships in terms of companionship such as "someone to play with" (p. 310). This is distinct from autistic adolescents', who described their understanding of friendship in terms of the quality of intimacy and security (Locke et al., 2010). Participants in the study by Calder et al. (2013) also reported their friendship quality as measured by the Friendship Quality Scale (Bukowski et al., 1994) to be lower compared to their peers which is consistent with previous studies that have used the same scale (e.g., Bauminger & Kasari, 2000). Despite this, qualitative findings indicate that the children in the study by Calder et al. (2013) appeared to be content with their friendships. The authors assert that lower scores on the loneliness questionnaire may not automatically imply that the friendship is of poorer quality, rather, it may be that "children with autism enjoyed friendships that were qualitatively different from their classmates" (p. 310). Furthermore, some children voiced their preference for being alone at times as they felt overwhelmed by the pressure to maintain constant social interactions. While previous studies have indicated a strong desire for friendship in many young people with autism (e.g., Hill, 2014; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008), this study by Calder et al. (2013) draw attention to the fact that autistic children may differ in the kind of social involvement that they prefer and this may be different to what is seen in non-autistic peers. Similar findings that some autistic children are content with their friendships have been noted by other researchers (Cunningham, 2022; Little et al., 2022). It points to the possibility that whilst friendship experiences are important to these children, they may not always be experienced or indeed valued in the same way as their peers.

Petrina et al. (2014) conducted a systematic review of 24 studies that looked at the characteristics of friendships in school age children with ASD. The review included studies that were quantitative comparisons of children with and without autism (n=17), quantitative examinations that were non-comparative (n=3) and qualitative investigations of friendships (n=4). Findings suggested that participants with autism were more likely to have fewer friends as compared to peers and they showed difficulties in identifying friendship characteristics. Further, children and adolescents perceived their friendships to be of lower quality. The authors of this review note that while some studies looked at the reciprocity of friendships, it was mostly done through sociometric techniques with no study investigating the perceptions of the nominated friend. Petrina et al. (2014) also draw attention to the fact that the reviewed studies did not reflect the heterogeneity of autism with a majority of participants being high functioning individuals. In a subsequent study in response to the lack of perspectives of

nominated friends, Petrina et al. (2017) examined satisfaction among nominated friends and participating children with ASD and reported high levels of satisfaction in the friendship dyads aged 5–10. High satisfaction was reported by both the children with ASD as well as their nominated friends (including children with and without ASD). The high friendship satisfaction reported by children with ASD is consistent with the qualitative findings by Calder et al. (2013).

O'Hagan and Hebron (2016) looked at perceptions of friendships among three adolescents with autism spectrum conditions aged 13–15 and their parents and teachers in the UK. All of the students were able to define and identify some characteristics of a good friend. Consistent with Calder et al. (2013), participants in this study appeared to value friendships in terms of companionship as opposed to more personal elements of friendships. Parents and teachers, however, felt that the students did not have a complete understanding of friendship. It was also seen that all three participants had a desire to have friends, but these were often not met.

A more recent systematic review of qualitative findings relating to peer relationships among autistic adolescents was undertaken in the UK by Cresswell et al. (2019). The review identified 10 studies, five of which were from the UK, three from the USA and two from Australia. It was seen that autistic adolescents understood, and experienced friendship differently as compared to their typically developing peers. Most autistic adolescents desired friendships and several reported having at least one friend, however, sometimes the desires were unfulfilled leading to loneliness. Challenges were also described, notably in making friends. Peer victimisation and bullying were also seen to be a common occurrence, however, the autistic adolescents made use of strategies, such as masquerading, in the face of these challenges.

Diversifying from often used methodologies of surveys and interviews, Yi and Siu (2021) used an ethnographic approach along with vignette-based interviews to explore interactions between children with ASD and their peers in a mainstream school in Hong Kong. The researchers carried out observations in a mainstream primary school focusing on how children with autism interacted with their peers and informal interviews with the school staff. Interviews were conducted with 10 autistic children and 10 typically developing peers. The interviews with peers were based on three vignettes that described various social situations

including a group project, a birthday party and a scenario of disruption involving a child with ASD. Results highlighted the lack of awareness among peers about the heterogeneity of autism, with the idea that children with autism are "not like us" (p. 242) recurrent in the interviews. Social interactions between autistic children and their peers were limited with autistic children expressing loneliness and difficulties associated with making friends. Children also held unfavourable views about the behaviours of their classmates with autism. Despite this, the children believed that the behaviours of classmates with autism were well-intentioned and also viewed friendships as being essential; this motivated them to approach and seek out interactions with their peers with autism. Yi and Siu (2021) therefore, argue that facilitating positive interactions between children with and without autism and implementing peer-mediated strategies in schools can enable acceptance and social inclusion of children with autism.

Utilising a meta-ethnographic approach, Black et al. (2024) conducted a scoping review of the friendship experiences of individuals on the autism spectrum. The review was not limited to a school-based setting and included 22 studies that explored the perspectives of autistic children, adolescents, and/or adults. However, a majority of the included studies (n=16) had children and adolescents as their participants. Thirteen of the included studies were from the UK, six studies were conducted in the USA, two in Australia and one in Japan. It was seen that autistic individuals defined friendships in terms of someone who cares, understands, and shares similar interests as themselves. These individuals developed friendships with others through close proximity, and with those who were similar to them. Whilst friendship experiences differed for each individual, they were seen as facilitating a sense of belonging and happiness. However, challenges were also present including loneliness, difficulties in communication styles, and uncertainty about friendships and being liked. Anxiety around social situations was common, and some individuals also tried to modify their behaviours to fit in with others. Black et al. (2024) highlight the fact that these autistic experiences of friendships challenge the notion that autistic people have lower social motivation. These findings are consistent with arguments made by other researchers that autistic people's levels of social motivations are comparable to the variabilities seen in non-autistic populations and that the notion of low social interest is often negated by autistic testimonies (e.g., Jaswal & Akhtar, 2019).

Autistic students' relationships with their peers are punctuated with negative experiences. Bullying appears to be a significant issue for these children in schools. In studies

that have elicited the voices of children about their school and social experiences discussed above, accounts of bullying are rife (e.g., Goodall, 2020a; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Poon et al., 2012). In one of the earlier studies, Humphrey and Symes (2010a) explored the frequency of reported bullying and levels of social support among pupils with autism (n=40), pupils with dyslexia (n=40) and a reference group with no identified special education needs (n=40) in England using questionnaires. The mean age of the participants was 13.9 years. Participants completed two questionnaires that provided data on the frequency of different types of bullying and perceived levels of social support. Results of the study indicated that participants belonging to the autism group experienced much higher levels of bullying and reported lower levels of social support as compared to the other two groups. In another study, Humphrey and Symes (2010b) qualitatively explored the responses to bullying and the use of social support by 36 pupils with ASD (age 11–16 years) in England. Variations among pupils in responses to bullying were noted which ranged from seeking help (for example, from teachers) to using violence. Further, how to respond to instances of bullying was determined by the students based on previous experiences, and decisions on seeking help from others such as parents, teachers or peers were determined by their relationship with them. Barriers to seeking support were also identified such as a lack of trust in others. One of the barriers reported was a preference for being alone in students with autism. Similar to participants in the study by Calder et al. (2013), some pupils in this study expressed a desire to be by themselves and not "be bothered to socialise" (p. 88). Humphrey and Symes (2010b) note that this raises a dilemma in that, while it is important to respect the wishes of these students to be alone, it may also make them susceptible to bullying.

Children with autism are subjected to more bullying and this can even result in home schooling due to fear and a lack of confidence to report it to teachers (Saggers et al., 2017). The high prevalence rates of bullying in young people with autism is also supported by a systematic review conducted by Schroeder et al. (2014). The 17 papers reviewed considered children and young people between the ages of 4–21. The authors concluded that young people with autism experienced higher levels of bullying than the general population. Social exclusion, number of friendships, and experiences of marginalisation all contributed to victimisation experiences thus underscoring the importance of positive social experiences for those with autism in educational contexts.

Autistic children's descriptions of their friendship experiences have revealed that they desire friendships, but also find it difficult to initiate and maintain friendships. This section showed that autistic children may perceive friendships differently, nevertheless, these experiences are important to them. Further, in addition to an understanding of their social networks in their classroom, an exploration of children's lived social experiences can reveal further nuances that are significant to develop a comprehensive picture of their experiences. While friendships are an essential part of schooling, another important aspect of children's experiences in school is play, which is also an integral aspect of development and socialisation. Acknowledging the importance of social play, the next section reviews the literature on the play experiences of autistic children in schools.

2.3.3 Autistic Children and Their Play

Play is ubiquitous in children's social experiences at school. Couper et al. (2013) state that "not only is the school playground a valuable curriculum resource but also the natural context where children, with a little help from their friends, can build a bridge to inclusion" (p. 28). Autistic children have described friendships in terms of "having someone to play with" (Calder et al., 2013, p. 310). Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010), having critically examined how play has been conceptualised for disabled children, argue that play has been used repeatedly for assessment, diagnosis, and intervention for children who experience disabilities. Historically, this is stoked by the view of disabled children as being deficient or lacking in skills when it comes to play, as compared to non-disabled children, and therefore requiring interventions to compensate for this deficit. This remains a current issue as a literature search of the words 'play' and 'children' and 'autism' brings up results saturated with terms such as 'intervention', 'teaching', 'support' and 'therapy'. Such a focus through this deficit lens means that the "intrinsic value of play has been eclipsed by a focus on its instrumental value" and the whole essence of the spontaneity of play is threatened (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010, p. 500).

Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010) assert that there is a need to shift our understanding of how the play of disabled children is conceptualised and focus more on its inherent value. The authors draw on three theoretical perspectives to support this reconceptualisation: (i) the new sociology of childhood, (ii) the social oppression theories of disability and, (iii) critical developmental psychology. In the new sociology of childhood (Prout & James, 2015), children

are conceptualised as active agents, and children's relationships and their social cultures are viewed as having value in its own right. Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010) also draw attention to how social oppression theories have contributed to emancipating play for children with disabilities by focusing on environmental and structural barriers, and the need for an accessible environment to support disabled children’s right to play. Further, Goodley and Runswick-Cole also highlight that critiquing developmental psychology perspectives is essential and placing play outside of this domain would enable it to challenge the dominant discourse of play as sites of intervention and correction for children with disabilities. Indeed, this dominant discourse is no different for children with the label of autism and the authors state, highlighting a tension:

> The argument is that children with autism can’t play in typical ways, they need to be taught to do so, but even if the children learn to play ‘properly’ this isn’t really ‘proper’ play at all because the play isn’t spontaneous. However, children who engage in ‘normative’ play escape this analysis as if playful interactions between typically developing children and peers and adults do not involve elements of teaching, imitation and mimicry. Why is it that only children with autism are considered to be pretending to play? (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010, p. 504)

Four studies that have looked at the play of autistic children, and children with other impairments discussed below illustrate the differing conceptualisations of play in literature (Burke, 2012; Burke & Claughton, 2019; Gilmore et al., 2019; Kangas et al., 2012). Studies addressing intervention for autistic children’s play have been valuable in supporting these children’s play and inclusion. Indeed, research has indicated the benefits of targeted social interventions for better social participation and inclusion of children with autism (Mamas et al., 2021), however, focusing on children’s own perspectives and viewing play for its intrinsic value can itself offer rich and nuanced understanding of children’s play worlds and position them as capable and active players.

Kangas et al. (2012) conducted an ethnographic study on autistic children’s play among themselves in a rehabilitation facility in Finland. Observations of 45 children in 11 groups, aged 6–16 years, were carried out in two phases. Lone play and group play of children were observed, and the authors report that the autistic children mostly played by themselves. Kangas

and colleagues delineated four types of solitary play that the children engaged in. *Sensorimotor practice play* involved ritualistic play organising play items, whilst *imitation* involved play imitating adults (e.g., teachers) and at times, other children. *Simple functional play* with objects appeared to be the most common, although there was not a lot of diversity in the play themes. A few children were also reported to engage in imaginative play with everyday objects used symbolically to represent something else in play. The researchers also noted that the children who had developed verbal skills played in groups with other children during which they creatively interacted and cooperated with one another, challenging conventional expectations of autistic children's play (Kangas et al., 2012). The authors emphasise that the support provided for autistic children's play must be guided by the observations of the children and should be adapted to the individual needs of the child. The recommendations made by the authors include adults or another child teaching single play-acts within structured situations, utilising scripts to support autistic children in group play, using peer modelling, and focused practise of skills that may be used in play contexts (Kangas et al., 2012).

Gilmore et al. (2019) used both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the engagement of children with ASD in a playground. Participants in this study were 55 children with ASD ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade in the USA. The authors used Playground Observation of Peer Engagement (POPE) (Kasari et al., 2005) and qualitative comments made by the observers from the research team. The study examined the playground activities of children with ASD in 16 schools during recess, their social communication with peers, the association between self-stimulatory behaviour and playground activities engaged in, and their affect during recess. The authors reported that a majority of the participating children with ASD engaged in solitary activities and/or were engaged peripherally for some time during recess and displayed self-stimulatory behaviour most frequently during solitary engagements. Further, some children also engaged in joint activities with their peers such as talking to peers or joining in on rule-based playground games. The children mostly showed neutral affect when on the playground. Positive social skills demonstrated by the participating children such as leadership and helping behaviours were also noted. The authors focus on both "challenges and successes" of the participating children in the playground and indicate the value of these findings in informing interventions to increase and support their peer involvement (Gilmore et al., 2019, p. 1351).

Given the deficit informed narratives prevalent around disabled children's play, Burke (2012) challenged the stereotypes associated with these children's play in that they are not capable of demonstrating skills and abilities as players. Burke draws on a research conducted on 72 participants aged between 6–10, out of which 35 were indicated as having an impairment. She used excerpts and observations of five children, including two autistic children to highlight this theme. The research employed a children's participatory photographic project where they took photos of the playground using some guiding statements. Using these photographs, the children then made a scrapbook with their written statements facilitated by prompts and used stamps to indicate feelings. This was used along with the researcher' field observations. The participants in the study demonstrated agency in creating their play worlds, showing self-determination and creativity. For instance, some children showed carefully considered strategies for joining in the play cultures of their peers, albeit in a slightly different way, that accommodated their impairment. They showed awareness of challenging situations but also perseverance to overcome the difficulties. One child developed rich and imaginative fantasy play worlds when playing by herself while another actively sought out playmates by going to 'popular' places. Through these illustrations, the author argues that random events, as perceived by an adult, may hold rich meaning, and provide insight into children's play cultures. She contends that children, regardless of their impairments are capable of agentic negotiations and creating rich play cultures with their peers.

Extending this argument, Burke and Claughton (2019) present four vignettes from two ethnographic studies, including the one discussed above (Burke, 2012), that depict engagement in play by children with impairments. The participants included some autistic children. Through the portrayal of children engaging in play, the authors challenge the deficit approach that has been mostly used to define and describe the play of children with impairment. In the two ethnographic studies, data were collected through researcher observation of children and child-compiled picture scrapbooks in a segregated special school. Children's own explanations and perceptions of their play (study 1) and researcher observations and photographs of participants engaging in play (study 2) were included. The children in the vignettes engaged creatively with their environment developing fantasy worlds, found ways to be a part of a play experience with peers, and engaged in negotiations both verbal and non-verbal, developing a "social contract" (p. 1076). Through a sociocultural lens, the authors explored the shared meaning and interactions in play between the children, and mirroring Burke (2012),

emphasised that children, irrespective of their impairments, can engage in rich and meaningful play, exert agency and contribute to the play worlds alongside their peers.

This section explored the play of autistic children and highlighted that research on these children's play continues to be focused on interventions and support. However, there is also evidence, albeit limited, that indicates that autistic children are capable of engaging in rich play cultures with their peers. Overall, while deficit-based narratives of disabled children's play are still prominent, this appears to be shifting and some emerging research has focused on challenging these conceptualisations. In the next section, methodological considerations that have enabled autistic children's voices to be captured and foregrounded are discussed.

2.4 Part Four: Understanding Children's Experiences

Ellis (2017) notably highlights that whilst children's participation in research no longer requires justification, the focus is now turned to how their participation can be supported and optimised. Many earlier studies that explored autistic children's social experiences were quantitative and utilised sociometric methods. These studies contributed to important understandings of the social networks and interactions of autistic children in their classrooms (e.g., Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010). However, quantitative methods may also be problematic given that topics of friendships, and the process of giving and receiving nominations can be sensitive for children (Conn, 2014). Further, many of these studies did not include observations of the social involvement of autistic children. Avramidis et al. (2017) concluded that the choice of sociometric methods used to explore children's social experiences can greatly influence the findings. The sociometric method called social cognitive mapping was identified as producing more detailed and nuanced understandings as compared to peer nomination methods. Avramidis et al. (2017) also observed that an overwhelming number of studies that looked at the social engagement of children with special needs are largely quantitative, leading to many contextual factors being overlooked or misunderstood.

Over the last decade, there has been a shift from quantitative methodological approaches to research investigating children's social experiences to more qualitative explorations. These qualitative studies have furthered the findings of sociometric studies by presenting a different dimension to these children's experiences that have focused on the children's own perspectives. For example, the sociometric studies reviewed in section 2.3.2

showed that autistic young people have lower friendship quality, experience more loneliness, and are less accepted than their peers (Chang et al., 2019; Kasari et al., 2011). However, there is also evidence that while these autistic children and young people may have lower friendship quality or may be on the periphery of social networks in their classrooms, they are satisfied with their social relationships and friendships (Calder et al., 2013; Petrina et al., 2017). The importance of considering children's own perspectives when using sociometric data is also further highlighted by de Leeuw et al. (2018). In their study involving 28 socially excluded children (as determined by sociometric data or parent reports) with social and behavioural difficulties, several children, despite having low sociometric scores and being indicated as socially excluded by their parents, contradicted the findings and reported no personal accounts of any victimisation or exclusion. The authors cautiously offer several possibilities for this: children's perceptions of the experience could have changed over time; the intensity of their experiences may have been lower than what was indicated by parents; or the child did not feel safe to talk about it. However, the fact remains that children's voices to understand their social experiences are indispensable.

In their systematic review exploring qualitative methods used to elicit the perspectives of young people with ASD on their educational experiences, Fayette and Bond (2018) emphasised that "research was still being conducted 'to' the participants and not 'with' them" (p. 362). The authors reviewed 12 qualitative studies from 2000 onwards that included at least one young person with ASD aged between 11–25 years. Eight studies were from the United Kingdom, two from Australia and one each from Singapore and Belgium. The participants were mainly identified as high functioning. Fayette and Bond (2018) report that semi-structured interviews were the most used method of gathering data in the included studies. Importantly, the authors emphasise the dearth of studies that have considered the participant's choice and involvement in data collection methods. They highlight the need to challenge norms regarding the participation of autistic young people in research and involve them in the research process to address power imbalances between the researcher and the participants.

Tyrrell and Woods (2020) reviewed both quantitative and qualitative studies to explore the methods used to elicit perspectives of school-aged participants with ASD. Their review included studies with participants below the age of 11 and was not limited to autistic children's educational experiences in particular. The children in the included studies were identified as being high functioning. Semi-structured interviews were the most commonly used method,

alongside the use of visual aids, electronic diaries, photographs, and drawings (Tyrrell & Woods, 2020). Visual support was seen as being potentially valuable in interviews. The authors also note the lack of "researcher-participant negotiations" in many studies and emphasise the need to ensure that methods are suited to the individual needs and characteristics of the participants (Tyrrell & Woods, 2020, p. 392).

More recently, Zanuttini (2023) conducted a systematic review of 34 studies published between 2016 and 2020 to explore methods used to capture perspectives of children with autism. Zanuttini's review was differentiated from the previous reviews (Fayette & Bond, 2018; Tyrrell & Woods, 2020), in that it synthesised both quantitative and qualitative studies that specifically looked at autistic children's educational experiences. This review confirmed that semi-structured interviews were the most commonly used method to elicit the voices of autistic children, in addition to questionnaires, photo-elicitation, and surveys. Notably, Zanuttini's (2023) review identified several gaps in the literature. The author notes that participant involvement in the design of the research was missing in all studies reviewed and only two articles report on the use of a Children's Research Advisory Group to guide the methods used in the study. The author also highlights that avenues and opportunities for participant input and feedback on the methods used were minimal within the reviewed studies. The review also identified a lack of studies from low-middle income countries, female participants and, participants under the age of 10.

Hill et al. (2016) implemented multiple techniques including activity-based and traditional observations to elicit the perspectives of young people with varying needs and disabilities. This study included 83 participants aged 8–19 years, all of whom identified with a range of disabilities including autism, ADHD, behavioural, emotional and social disorders, and speech-language and communication difficulties amongst others. A Young Researchers Group that included children with a wide variety of special education needs advised on all stages of the study. Hill et al. (2016) demonstrated that by utilising creative and flexible methods, it was possible to elicit the perspectives of all young people including those who experienced challenges with communication. They challenge the view it is not possible to elicit the views of young people with diverse needs.

Several methods can be used to enhance the voice of the autistic child. Hill (2014) made use of photo-elicitation as a method to facilitate the views of young people with autism about

their school experiences (a discussion of the young people's experiences is presented in section 2.3.1). Participants in this study captured images of places in schools that were significant to them and the photos were then used as a basis for an informal discussion. The use of photographs supported the young people to share their abstract experiences by acting as "aides-memoires" (p. 87). Recently, other studies with autistic young people have also successfully made use of photographs to support the participants in expressing their views (see Ha & Whittaker, 2016; Lam et al., 2020).

Harrington et al. (2014) identified strategies that were used to engage eight children with ASD in research interviews regarding their mainstream school experiences in Australia. During the interview, the communication style of the researcher was modified to suit the needs of the participants and children were given the option of parental support during interviews. Visual support and picture communication symbols (PCS) were incorporated in the interviews. Overall, Harrington et al. (2014) reported success in the use of flexible and creative strategies to elicit the voices of children with autism, and this suggests how important it is to ensure that the methods selected are aligned with the unique needs of the young people.

In discussing the methods appropriate for researching the social world of autistic children, Ellis (2017) argues that using multiple methods, so that verbal communication is not prioritised, is very important to enable the participation of all children. Ellis (2017) involved 11 autistic children (enrolled in years 7–10) in the study which utilised six different methods within an ethnographic approach. The methods included observations of the children, child-written essays, taking photographs, creating a patchwork quilt, and interviews with parents and teachers. Ellis discussed the approaches in the context of two main challenges to participation encountered during the process namely children's anxiety, and communication difficulties. Ellis (2017) recommended that unambiguous structured instructions are important to ease children's possible anxiety and enhance their participation. This was reflected in the photography task where children were provided with a clear step-by-step guide on taking photos of familiar places and objects of significance and then creating an album. Similarly, in the essay task, a clear structure was provided to the children to write about "imagined futures" (p. 27). However, Ellis argues that while these child-centred methods are highly useful in promoting participation and accommodating communication challenges, they could also prevent the researcher from following up on specific or pertinent information that appear in the moment. The author suggests that garnering adults' views without privileging them over the

children's views can bring a unique perspective to the social context. Methods such as researcher observation and parent and teacher interviews broaden understanding of the child's experience. Essentially, Ellis (2017) advocates for a mixed-method approach looking at different perspectives in research exploring the social worlds of autistic children.

A mixed-method approach to understanding autistic children's social experiences was also suggested by Conn (2015). Conn carried out case study research with two boys with autism aged 8–9 years using the mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) which included observations, conversations with children, and interviews with parents and the peer group. Conn noted the importance of considering a wide perspective in autism research. Consistent with Ellis (2017), it was shown that researching the social world of children with autism requires the use of multiple research methods that will help overcome the communication barriers experienced by the children. The triangulation of data from multiple sources was also important to add to the richness of the data to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the social experiences of children with autism (Conn, 2015).

Recently, Scott-Barrett et al. (2023) explored the ways in which researchers can engage in a meaningful manner with autistic children. This UK study included 12 autistic children aged 7–11 years. The researcher sought to understand their views about the school and playground environment, and made use of voice-recorders, photography, and Lego to facilitate the children's meaningful self-expression. The children also reflected on their experiences of participating in the research. Scott-Barrett et al. (2023) identified the way children think about the research audience such as recognising that the recording would be listened to by the researcher in the future. The author emphasised the need to ensure that children are aware of who the audience of the research data will be as this is crucial to the informed consent process. Scott-Barrett et al. (2023) also report that these methods facilitated the children's enjoyment and pride while participating in the research and the children engaged creatively with the research process. The multimodal methods also allowed the children to exercise a higher degree of control as compared to traditional research methods. Scott-Barrett et al. (2023) emphasised that a diverse approach to data collection is important to ensure that autistic children can share their experiences in ways that align with their interests and preferences for communication. Further, the focus of the research needs to be relevant and meaningful to the autistic children themselves. Importantly, the authors reflect that "this research seem to suggest that the more control and power we hand over to the children, the more meaningful the processes and

interaction may become to the children and the more engaged they may be with the process" (Scott-Barrett et al., 2023, p. 367). This includes being adaptive and open to unexpected situations.

2.5 Summary

Autism is commonly associated with difficulties in social interaction. Historically, the dominant discourse portrayed autistic children as incapable or unwilling to form social relationships. However, recent studies have shown that autistic children desire social relations and do have friendships. The importance of being socially included is also reflected in studies focusing on the perspectives of autistic young people. Currently, these children's school-based experiences have been explored through both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. While quantitative studies have revealed mixed results concerning their social participation, overall, it was seen that autistic children tend to be on the periphery of social networks, experience lower reciprocity in friendships and more loneliness as compared to their peers. Autistic children have also expressed feelings of isolation and rejection, and experienced bullying in schools. On the other hand, not all experiences described by the children were bleak. Several accounts by students with autism featured positive descriptions of having friends and their inclusive experiences. The children were also seen to demonstrate agency and creativity when playing with their peers. Taken together, the studies serve to highlight the view that the social experiences of autistic children in schools and their relationships with peers can be both "barriers and enablers" to their successful inclusion at school (Aubineau & Blicharska, 2020; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008, p. 34).

Given the importance of being accepted and having peer relationships for autistic children, it is imperative that their social experiences in inclusive classrooms are explored to develop an authentic and genuine understanding of how these children perceive and experience their social lives in educational settings. This is even more pertinent given the minimal number of studies exploring autistic children's social experiences within a rights-informed approach. This position is underscored by international and local regulations and policies such the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and is influenced by the paradigm of the new sociology of childhood (Prout & James, 2015). The approaches to researching with autistic children highlight the need to use methods that are reflective of their interests and preferences and suited to their skills. Ellis (2017) observes that there appears to be a shift in the methods

that elicit young people's views from traditional interviewing and observations to methods that directly engage the children in the research process. Using creative and participatory techniques, multiple methods and considering different perspectives are also emphasised as beneficial in research with children. Further, autistic children's influence on data collection methods appears to be limited, prompting the need to involve them actively in the research process. The next chapter outlines the methodological framework that was employed in this current study to explore and understand autistic children's social experiences at school.

Chapter 3
Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology used within the current study. Using a social constructivism research paradigm, an ethnographic methodology was adopted. The specific research methods used in this study are discussed, including a reflexive examination of the researcher's position during data collection. The chapter then presents an overview of the data analysis procedures and concludes with a description of the two autistic participants in this study and their social context in school.

3.1 Research Paradigms

Research paradigms are a way of looking at the world and what is being researched, what is accepted as knowledge and the ways of pursuing it (Cohen et al., 2017). Creswell and Poth (2018) further highlight that the research process may be guided by theoretical perspectives and may reflect the researcher's beliefs and paradigms. This constitutes the interpretive framework of the research. This study is conceptualised within a rights-informed approach that seeks to foreground autistic children's voices and lived social experiences in their school and is aligned with a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is a data-driven approach that focuses on understanding and exploring phenomena and cases situated in their contexts. This approach reflects the subjectivity inherent in the research process, prioritises lived accounts, and is grounded in data that may at times be unstructured (Hammersley, 2013). The emphasis is on how individuals, in this instance autistic children, interpret and make sense of their social worlds (Bryman, 2012), to prioritise participant voices and explore issues to better understand their actions and behaviours (Cohen et al., 2017).

Researcher's interpretive frameworks or research paradigms are determined by their philosophical assumptions, and understanding of ontology and epistemology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For the current research, ontology is understood as relating to what constitutes the essence of the social reality or the structure of the social world (Waring, 2012). Ontological assumptions are related to the very nature of reality and the social phenomenon being studied (Cohen et al., 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). On the other hand, epistemological assumptions explore notions of knowledge and determine, "What counts as knowledge?" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). In this view, epistemological considerations are related to what is considered

acceptable knowledge, how this can be acquired, its nature, and how it can be communicated to others (Bryman, 2012; Cohen et al., 2017).

This current study uses a social constructivism research paradigm where I am interested in finding ways that autistic children make meaning of their social situations at school. This paradigm aligns with the view that social phenomenon and its meaning is an outcome of social interactions and is constantly shifting and emerging (Bryman, 2012). Social constructivism rejects the paradigm of positivism, which looks at the social world as existing external to the individual in an objective reality (Burr, 2015; Cohen et al., 2017). Social constructivism has the ontology that there are multiple realities that are constructed through the lived experiences of individuals and developed through interactions with their environment. The epistemological position argues that reality is shaped by the dynamic interaction between the researcher's perspectives and the experiences of the research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The meanings attributed to experiences by individuals are multiple and subjective and a researcher looks for "the complexity of views" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). Burr (2015) states that social constructivism is about questioning the assumptions and categories through which we view the world and critically examining this knowledge as socially constructed.

Within the paradigm of social constructivism, the aim of this study was to explore the social phenomenon through multiple lenses of the autistic children, by focusing on the context, environment, and interactions (Cohen et al., 2017). Given that this study focused on autistic children's unique and subjective experiences, a social constructivist paradigm is suited for this study as it allows for the children's construction of meaning in their lived experiences and accounts to be foregrounded through methods such as interviews and observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It also acknowledges that subjectivity is inherent in both how this study is undertaken with children, and the analysis of the data. In this research, knowledge is considered to be produced and sustained through the daily interactions between the participants in their everyday lives, embedded in the historical and cultural contexts (Burr, 2015). The intention therefore is not to present an objective truth but to explore the social worlds of autistic children through its interpretation by them (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Bryman, 2012).

3.2 Ethnographic Research

An ethnographic methodology was used in this study. An ethnographic approach working alongside children focuses on investigating their everyday experiences to understand what it means to be a child, defined by their perceptions and values, and their active interactions within their social contexts (Gulløv & Skreland, 2016). Ethnographers study the lived experiences of people in the context of their everyday lives and typically, this involves the researcher being immersed in the social setting for an extended period, making regular direct observations, listening and engaging in conversations, conducting interviews, collecting documents, and writing up a detailed account (Bryman, 2012). Fetterman (2020) explains that ethnography aims to be reflective of the genuine stories and experiences of people in their social contexts, and foregrounds verbatim quotes and thick descriptions of the events and situations which the participants are a part of. The emic perspective, that is the insider perspective of reality, is fundamental to ethnography (Fetterman, 2020). Ethnography is typically focused on a few small-scale cases to enable a comprehensive and detailed investigation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

Prout and James (2015) emphasise that ethnography allows for a more direct voice and participation of children in the research process, and is thus an appropriate methodology to study childhood. This approach is critical to the current study given it allows for the recognition and promotion of children as competent rights-holders and supports their voices to take centre stage (Barley, 2014; Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2015; Tickle, 2017). This is done by enabling children to negotiate their engagement with the researcher and guide the research process and the methods used (Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2015). Ethnography allows a wide range of data collection techniques, thus ensuring multiple opportunities for children's voices to be heard (Barley, 2014).

Ethnography involves a combination of methods, primarily consisting of observations, informal conversations, interviews, and examination of documents and artefacts An ethnographer's exploration of the social and cultural setting begins with fieldwork which involves prolonged engagement with people in their natural settings. Although data collection involves using a variety of methods and techniques, participant observation and informal conversations are typically the primary sources (Fetterman, 2020; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) highlight that collecting ethnographic data involves

being a part of and engaging with people's lives for extended durations, but also gathering any forms of data that may elucidate the understanding of what is being studied.

Effective fieldwork is characterised by participant observation which involves engaging in the lives of the participants but also maintaining a professional distance (Fetterman, 2020). Given observations are a powerful means of engaging with children, it is important to ensure that their rights and autonomy are respected (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Making use of direct observation in a naturalistic setting may be useful whilst working with children, including autistic children who may face challenges in articulating their experiences (Gaffney, 2019; O'Reilly et al., 2013). The observations made by the ethnographer are put into context through interviews (Fetterman, 2020; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Combining interviews with participant observation also offers the distinct advantage of data collected through both methods complementing the other and providing broader insights (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

When interviews are used within ethnographic research, they can range from spontaneous and informal conversations during an activity, where the distinction between participant observation and an interview is often blurred, to more formal structured or semi-structured interviews. Informal interviews, however, constitute the most common in ethnography and are usually used to explore people's perceptions and may take the form of casual conversations but with a specific and implicit research agenda (Fetterman, 2020). Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) argue that interviews, whether spontaneously elicited or more formally conducted, have to be "viewed as a social event, where the interviewer is a participant observer" (p. 124).

Deriving from cultural anthropology, ethnography has diverged over the decades across the social sciences. Over the last decade, researchers have suggested the usefulness of incorporating and utilising creative participatory approaches and methods within an ethnographic framework, including within educational ethnographies (e.g., Barley & Russell, 2019; Canosa et al., 2018; Gulløv & Skreland, 2016; Tickle, 2017). For example, Gulløv and Skreland (2016) argue that including participant-based approaches within an ethnographic methodology enables better engagement with children as they create the materials themselves, providing more opportunities for in-the-moment authentic informal talks and discussions with

the researcher. The next section describes the value of participatory methods when exploring the lives and experiences of autistic children.

3.3 Foregrounding Participation of Children in Research

Goodall (2020b) argues that the voice of autistic young people within a rights-based framework is at its preliminary stages. Young people have the right for their voices to be heard and considered, and a participatory approach allows for the realisation of these rights at multiple levels of engagement enabling meaningful inputs from them in research (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015).

Fletcher-Watson and colleagues (2019) discuss participatory approach in research focusing on autism as one where the views of autistic individuals and their allies are incorporated into the development and implementation of research while also addressing the power imbalance that is inherent in the relationship between the researcher and research participants. When it comes to research involving autistic individuals, Pellicano et al. (2017) draw attention to three core principles of participatory approach: (i) trust, (ii) mutual respect, and (iii) listening and learning. Building rapport and developing trust, engaging authentically and avoiding tokenism, recognising the diversity of autism, undermining power imbalances, and adapting the methodology and dissemination to ensure wide engagement are all important to develop research that is inclusive and participatory (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Pellicano et al., 2017).

There has been a trend in research with children towards increasing their involvement from that of participants to co-researchers across all stages of the research process (Lundy et al., 2011). Lundy and colleagues emphasise that children's right to express and have their views taken seriously as per Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) must extend beyond their mere participation in research to active involvement in the research process itself. Involving children as co-researchers can provide valuable inputs on the research questions, and methods that can facilitate effective participation of their peers, as well as in the interpretation and dissemination of findings (Lundy et al., 2011).

One way in which children can be actively involved in research is through the use of a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) and several research studies have successfully

involved children within CRAGs (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014; Donegan et al., 2023; Goodall, 2020a; Hill et al., 2016; Lundy & McEvoy, 2011). For example, Bourke and Loveridge (2014) highlight how a CRAG consisting of 7 children aged 7–12 years worked alongside the researchers, in a study that involved interviewing children on their experiences of learning and assessment, by providing feedback on the interview questions and engaging in preliminary analysis. The CRAG facilitated deeper and more meaningful insights into issues that were reflective of children's experiences (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014). Similarly, Goodall (2020a) consulted a CRAG consisting of three autistic young people (11–17 years) in a study that explored autistic young people's educational experiences. The CRAG advised on the methods used and helped to identify issues that may be important to autistic children concerning their educational experiences. Recently, Donegan et al. (2023) engaged with a Children's Research Advisory Group and explored issues of power and participation whilst working alongside children as co-researchers in digital spaces. Drawing from a larger study, in their article the authors report that 23 children acted as researchers across 6 CRAGS. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the research methods were adapted to enable the children to engage as co-researchers remotely, and the authors made use of what they termed 'digital dialogues' to facilitate this process. Donegan and colleagues highlight how through engaging as co-researchers, the children's confidence and expertise regarding their voice was developed. The children competently engaged in sharing important views, carried out interviews with their peers, and contributed to the research process (Donegan et al., 2023). In research specifically involving autistic individuals, eliciting and incorporating their views can be useful in the development of research and research methods that are meaningful to the autistic community, however, more work is needed to ensure the involvement of autistic young people, especially children (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Scott-Barrett et al., 2019).

Increasingly, visual participatory methods consisting of creative and arts-based approaches have also become prevalent in research with children, including ethnographic studies, as it allows participants to express their views and ideas without prioritising verbal language (Barley & Russell, 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2021; Vindrola-Padros et al., 2016). Participant generated visual data may include videos, drawings, photographs, and other artefacts and these have been used either as data sources in itself or as a basis to elicit conversations and meaning about the topic. For instance, these have been utilised as a springboard for discussion around school and other experiences (e.g., Ellis, 2017; Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Zazzi & Faragher, 2018) and in the process of consent (Loyd, 2012;

Vindrola-Padros et al., 2016). Furthermore, participatory methods include a diverse range of techniques and can be adapted to support and reflect the strengths of the participants (Coyne & Carter, 2018). In a scoping review on arts-based methods used in community research with a focus on educational or social practices, Coemans and Hannes (2017) identified that these methods were utilised as they can challenge traditional research methods by overcoming power imbalances between researchers and participants.

Reflecting on their research that examined social inclusion from the perspectives of children with disabilities, Little et al. (2022) suggest that using a combination of different approaches including direct observations, student sensitive interviews and arts-based approaches can provide a deeper understanding of social inclusion in general education settings. Similarly, Barley and Russell (2019) discuss two ethnographies in England to elucidate the value of using participatory visual methods in ethnographic research involving young people. The first ethnography explored identities in a multi-ethnic classroom. This study with primary aged children made use of activities that were developed collaboratively with the children, such as tours, pictures, and 'model identities' which were then accompanied by informal interviews. The second ethnography explored the lives of young people *Not in Employment, Education or Training* (NEET) through the use of life-story maps and photographs that served as probes for interviews. Reflecting on these ethnographies, Barley and Russell (2019) argue that along with ethnographic fieldnotes, visual participatory methods produce rich and nuanced data of children's experiences which would not have been accessed through observations and verbal methods alone. Further, they also argue for the need to contextualise the images or visual products, and to use them as tools to elicit further data, and not as data in themselves, to ensure that the perspectives of participants are meaningfully captured. Making use of participatory visual methods in ethnographic educational research allows participants to influence the research as existing power differentials between the researcher and the research participants are reduced (Barley & Russell, 2019).

Utilising arts-based visual methods however does not necessarily mean that the research is consequently participatory (Brown, 2022). As Brown asserts, a participatory approach has to be conceptualised as a continuum where research participants are minimally involved at one end to complete participation as co-researchers at the other end. In the scope of the present study, it is acknowledged that the research questions and methodologies were pre-determined by myself as the researcher and governed by time constraints, in the context of

doctoral study and procedural ethics obligations. However, the participant children in this study were involved in, and guided, the methods that were used and a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) also advised on methods to be used prior to beginning data collection. This study conceptualised for the children's experiences to take centre stage through authenticity, reflexivity, and flexibility to facilitate engagement in "children's own terms" through participatory methods (White et al., 2010, p. 153). Participatory research methods provide the opportunity for participants to lead and be responsible for the research, however, Brown (2022) argues that this does not imply the need for participant involvement at every stage in the research process, but reflexivity and transparency on the part of the researcher throughout the research process are critical.

3.4 Research Methods

Participatory methods, grounded in the ethnographic framework, to complement the primary data collection methods of observations and interviews were used in this study. The specific methods that were employed beginning from the recruitment of participants, the ethical considerations, the specific methods used for data collection, and the researcher's position within the study are presented in this section.

3.4.1 The Process of Entry and Participant Recruitment

Purposive and intentional sampling was used for the school site of research, and the participating children, to explore the phenomenon being studied (Bryman, 2012). As a qualitative study, the sample size was small to allow for an in-depth understanding of the experiences of each individual and their context (Creswell, 2015). This study consisted of two main participants, both boys (aged 5 and 8) with a diagnosis of autism. The mothers and teachers of these participants also contributed to the study as they enabled further contextual understanding of the data. They gave full informed consent for the research to take place, and although not participants in terms of the focus of the study, they were indirectly involved through the context. Four other children, including two autistic children, who formed the Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) were also included, where the children were consulted at the beginning of the study prior to observations in the classrooms. The study was conducted in a primary school in New Zealand that had a total roll of approximately 500

students. The direct and indirect participants of this study are indicated in Tables 3.1 and Table 3.2.

Table 3.1

Child Participants of the Study

Name	Age	Gender	Autism Diagnosis
Main study participants			
Harry	5	Male	Yes
James	8	Male	Yes
CRAG participants			
Ashley	5	Female	No
Ben	8	Male	Yes
Ryan	8	Male	Yes
Thomas	10	Male	No

Table 3.2

Indirect Adult Participants of the Study

Name	Role
James	
Emma	Assistant Principal, Teacher 1
Shane	Teacher 2
Claire	Teacher 3
Mike	Teacher-aide
Emily	Mother
Harry	
Sara	Teacher
Selena	Teacher-aide
Alice	Mother

Note: Over the course of observation, James had three class teachers.

Initially, two schools were contacted because of their working relationship with the university. Both schools were known for an environment that facilitates the participation of all children, in an inclusive and respectful setting. Additionally, given the sustained fieldwork that would be required, close geographical convenience was also a consideration. School entry involved a process of communication and negotiation with members of the school's leadership team. The assistant principal of one of the schools expressed an interest in the study (after invitation through an email to explore the possibility), and a meeting date was set to meet relevant personnel and provide them with detailed information sheets. I met with the assistant principal to discuss the scope of the study and to answer any questions and concerns with regard to the school's involvement, and the respective children's involvement. Following this, the assistant principal responded that the school had a keen interest in being a part of the study, and I was invited to speak about my research at a staff meeting of teachers who worked with high-needs students[1]. Potential participants were identified at the staff meeting. I was invited to spend half a day in the classrooms meeting with four teachers, who had autistic students in their class. The teachers provided verbal consent to meeting me in their classroom to learn more about the research. I used the opportunity to introduce myself and talk about my research as part of the initial stages of the informed consent process. Meeting with the teachers in their classrooms and providing them with information regarding the research was important given that ethnography involves extensive and ongoing time in the classroom, for fieldwork.

The inclusion criteria for participation provided by the researcher were: (i) children who had a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder aged 9–13 (for the main study and two participants for the CRAG); (ii) attend school regularly; (iii) have the capability to provide informed assent or dissent verbally or non-verbally through any medium of communication; and (iv) have parental informed consent. The inclusion criteria incorporated the initial intention to invite participants aged 9–13 to take part in the study, given that the children would have had a few years of social experiences and engagement with peers since beginning school. However, following preliminary discussions with the school leadership team, they suggested that younger children would also be interested and would benefit from participation in the research. These younger children also had social experiences in their school years, and having their voices heard about their social experiences would be empowering. A decision was made to broaden the age group to include

[1] In New Zealand, high needs students are identified as those who require specialist support at schools in areas that include learning, vision, hearing, language use and physical difficulties (Ministry of Education, 2024a).

younger children aged 5 and above, provided all the other inclusion criteria were met. The assistant principal initially contacted the parents of potential child participants based on the criteria for selection. Although not a selection criterion, the two autistic participants who met the inclusion criteria were both boys, and this was reflective of the diagnosis rates of autism among the general population where males were four times as likely than females to have an autism diagnosis (Bowden et al., 2020).

The teachers of the potential participants had indicated verbal consent for me to carry out observations in their classroom prior to the parents being contacted. Parents and caregivers of potential CRAG participants were also contacted by the assistant principal. Upon receiving positive feedback from the parents and caregivers, information sheets and consent forms were sent to the parents and caregivers through the child's teacher. Information sheets and consent forms were provided to the teachers of the invited participants. Information sheets were also provided to the teachers of the invited CRAG participants (who were peers of the children, but in a different classroom). Once consent was received from parents and teachers, children were provided with information sheets and consent forms. Information sheets were also provided for the parents of all other children (who were non-participants) in the invited participant's classroom so that they were aware of my research role within the classroom over the two terms (see Information sheets, Appendices B–J). The ethical considerations and the process of informed consent that was followed are now discussed.

3.4.2 The Ethics of Research

The study was granted full ethical approval from Massey University's Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants (SOB 20/62). I also completed a full Police Vetting undertaken by the Institute of Education, Massey University as required by the Children's Act 2014 (Oranga Tamariki: Ministry for Children & Ministry of Education, 2014).

Research including children and young people involves complex ethical considerations and challenges (Graham et al., 2015). Ethical decisions are situated contextually and are influenced by social, institutional, political and cultural situations (Cohen et al., 2017). This study was guided by the core ethical principles of justice, beneficence, and non-maleficence while considering issues of informed consent, confidentiality, safety and power relations that

exist when researching children (Cohen et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2013). This meant that I was committed to ensuring the participant's assent and comfort while undertaking any research interviews or activities, and reflexively considering my role as a researcher in the classroom and the potential consequences of this throughout the research process for the children.

The ethical considerations in this research were informed by ongoing reflexivity. Although reflexivity has been conceptualised in many ways in qualitative research, Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) define reflexivity as "a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes" (p. 242). This requires a critical consideration of "the intertwined personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual factors that bring research into being" (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023, p. 242). Given my research involved working closely alongside children, it was critical that I did not impose my own views or values on the interpretation of their experiences and 'worldviews'. As Barley (2014) states, an ethnographer needs to be a "self-interrogator" and examine their values, beliefs, and interpretations *throughout* the research process (p. 7). Graham et al. (2013) argue that reflexivity requires a thorough deliberation on the purpose of the research, the potential impact on the child participants, the researcher's preparedness in conducting the research, as well as their underlying assumptions about children and childhood experiences.

In this current study, reflexive engagement involved a critical interrogation of the child voices and perspectives that were being heard, respected, and foregrounded across the different phases of the research. Barley (2014) argues that reflexivity is integral to ethnographic research with children to ensure the conclusions' trustworthiness and goes on to outline a twofold approach to reflexivity that she adopted in ethnographic research with young children in their classroom. This included "academic reflexivity" and "personal reflexivity" (p. 7). Academic reflexivity involves critical reflections on the research process, methods, and theoretical frameworks, while personal reflexivity is related to an examination of the researcher's experiences and beliefs. In this current research, I actively used both *academic* and *personal* reflexivity. Academic reflexivity ensured that the children's voices and rights were respected in the consideration of methods, the recording of data through fieldnotes and observations, data analysis, the process of informed consent and dissent, and other ethical considerations (see Chapter 4), while personal reflexivity involved ongoing critical reflections on my role as an adult researcher in the classroom (see Section 3.4.5).

This study was also guided by the ethical commitments for research involving children that are outlined in the UNICEF compendium on Ethical Research with Children (ERIC, Graham et al., 2013), The National Ethical Standards (National Ethics Advisory Committee, 2019), and The Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants (Massey University, 2017). The international charter for ERIC (Graham et al., 2013) outlines seven core commitments to ethical research with children, which informed and guided this study:

1. Ethics in research involving children is everyone's responsibility;
2. Respecting the dignity of children is core to ethical research;
3. Research involving children must be just and equitable;
4. Ethical research benefits children;
5. Children should never be harmed by their participation in research;
6. Research must always obtain children's informed and ongoing consent;
7. Ethical research requires ongoing refection. (p. 23)

The differential power relations that exist between the researcher and the participants are acknowledged. Reflexive considerations of factors that impact issues of power guided this study. These included reflecting on and addressing how the researcher may be perceived by the child, making use of safe places for interviews and other activities, providing participants opportunities to withdraw, and using appropriate methods that contribute to more equitable power balances (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). Power relations are however inherent in all research and those that exist between adults and children can influence their participation (Graham et al., 2013; Scott-Barrett et al., 2019). It has been highlighted that in school-based research, children may feel obliged to participate (Bucknall, 2012; Gallagher et al., 2010) and may perceive that there are correct answers to questions being asked by an adult about their experiences (Bland, 2018; Prior, 2016). This has particular implications for the current research given that the study was undertaken within a school context. Therefore, it becomes essential to ensure that the choice to participate is genuinely free and not out of obligation to the school, teachers, or parents. It was communicated to the children that choosing not to participate would not have any negative repercussions and their right to dissent was respected throughout the data collection period.

Informed Consent and Assent. Research that is informed by the UNCRC (1989) requires that children are provided adult guidance (Article 5) and information (Article 13, 17) to assist them in developing an informed view (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012). Consent was conceptualised as an ongoing, negotiable and continuous process throughout this research (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Graham et al., 2013).

Written informed consent was obtained from the assistant principal of the school, the teacher and teacher-aides of the two invited children, and their caregivers, who were the children's mothers in this study. The mothers of the invited child participants provided written consent that included consent for the parent to be a part of the study in their capacity to provide important contextual information (for the main participants) as well as consent for their child's participation in the study. Written consent was sought from the teachers (including teacher-aides) for my engagement as a researcher in their classrooms and for their anonymous inclusion in the fieldnotes regarding contextual information provided or their interaction with the children who were the focus of the study. After obtaining consent from parents and teachers, I met with the assistant principal, and the overall Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) of the school, to discuss the needs and preferences of the potential participating children, to tailor the consent forms for them. Both teachers were familiar with the needs and preferences of the potential child participants. The children's information sheet and consent forms were then adapted further in consultation with the teachers.

As part of the informed consent process for the two main child participants, I met with the families before obtaining the children's written consent, to introduce myself to the children and answer any questions about the research. The home visits were organised at a time that was convenient for the children's families. At this stage, the primary caregiver had provided written consent to their and their child's participation in the study, and the children had verbally consented to my presence at their home. Meeting with the families this way provided an opportunity to monitor children's assent from the very beginning of the study and ensure that the children did not feel obligated to be a part of the study as the initial contact regarding the research was made by their teacher. During this meeting, I also stressed to the children that they could stop participating at any time and that there would be no consequences to them declining to participate.

After the children verbally consented to participate in the research, the adapted information sheet that included images was provided to the children and they were encouraged to engage with the information with help from a parent or teacher. Given the participating children's ability to write, written consent from the children was obtained prior to beginning classroom observations. From the outset, the children's right to dissent was acknowledged, respected and prioritised over the adult's consent for them to be a part of the research (Graham et al., 2013). Throughout the research, informed dissent may be communicated by the child through non-verbal means such as body language and it is pertinent that the researcher is attentive to the children's gestures and non-verbal behaviours and provide ongoing opportunities for them to reconsider their participation (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014; Dockett et al., 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2011). Providing opportunities for children to dissent, and affirming their right to do so, strengthens the process of informed consent (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014). During the course of observations at the school, throughout my time there, I was mindful of various verbal and non-verbal cues and continually monitored participants' assent to participate in the study.

Essentially, children's informed consent was established and checked throughout this study by providing opportunities on different occasions to enable children to express their consent. These times and spaces included the participant's home prior to beginning data collection, through the process of written informed consent where the participant read through the information sheet with the help of a parent or/and teacher, and during data collection in the classroom where I ensured participants' ongoing assent and respected their right to dissent. Reflexivity employed in the informed consent process is reviewed further in Chapter 4 where the children's role in this research is discussed.

Privacy and Confidentiality. Pseudonyms for the participants and other children who were present were implemented from the beginning of the study. Pseudonyms were used for all participants throughout the researcher's notes To minimise the risk of identification, information about the school that is not directly relevant to the study is kept confidential in this thesis. The handwritten fieldnotes made during observations were kept on the researcher's person at all times during fieldwork and associated paper files and consent forms were stored in a locked cabinet. Pictures of the activity, audio recordings of the interviews, interview transcripts, and other related electronic documents that contained fieldwork data, were stored in a single access password and fingerprint protected laptop, only accessible by the researcher.

The data collected during fieldwork, including pictures, was only shared with the research supervisors.

Recording, Storing, and Retrieving Data. A researcher diary consisting of descriptive and reflexive fieldnotes of contextual information, events that occurred, and the researcher's own experiences and evaluations was maintained to create a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the social experiences of the children. Fieldnotes taken at the time of the observations represent the activities undertaken by the ethnographer, and together with reflective comments, create a record of observations reflective of the community and culture (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). Schensul and LeCompte (2013) describe the ethnographic materials that a researcher works with as "inscriptions, descriptions and transcriptions" (p. 60). Inscriptions are the notes that an ethnographer maintains in their mind while in the field, while descriptions involve writing down the notes in the form of jottings and fieldnotes. Finally, transcription refers to the verbatims of interviews or a verbatim account of conversations and observations in the field. In this study, the recording of data in the form of fieldnotes was also accompanied by the process of reflection *and* reflexivity. Graham et al. (2016) argue that "reflexivity differs from reflection in that it moves beyond the descriptive 'what' and the analytical 'why' and 'what if' of ethical dilemmas to the critical 'now what'" (p. 86). In this study, this included a consideration of researcher assumptions regarding the children being engaged in research and their experiences, the researcher's own childhood experiences and past experiences working with children, power differentials existing between the researcher and child participants, and flexible engagement with ethical dilemmas that arose during fieldwork.

During observations in the classrooms, at times my role was one of a *researcher participant* in the classroom activities, which included, for instance, sitting down with the children during circle time or joining in with the Physical Education (PE) games upon invitation by the participating children. Given that in these situations writing down notes was not always feasible, I maintained observations as keywords in my mind. During opportunities to be a *non-participant observer*, when the children were involved in their daily academic tasks, I expanded on the keywords in a notebook, with additional thoughts, reflections, and verbatim quotes from the participants where possible. At the end of the day, I reflected on and expanded key points into descriptive fieldnotes which I maintained as individual electronic files for each day of observation. These fieldnotes included a detailed description of the day's events,

reflections on the observations, conversations that I had with the participants, as well as thoughts and reminders for following up the next day. Initially, a separate notebook from the fieldnotes was used to jot down analytic thoughts and reflections, but later this progressed to reflections within the observation fieldnotes itself which enabled an iterative process of going back and forth between observations and ideas. This process contributed to future analysis.

Artefacts made by the participant children were photographed with their permission and the discussions following activities were recorded on a university issued voice recorder. At the end of the day, these sources of data were imported into my computer. These data—fieldnotes, pictures, recordings, and transcriptions—were imported into the platform NVivo at the end of the week for later analysis.

3.4.3 Data Collection Methods

In the following section, I describe the specific methods that were used to collect data in this study. Prior to classroom observation and formal data collection, a Children's Research Advisory Group was formed in order to provide advice on the data collection methods to be used. This section will first discuss the CRAG process, followed by the methods that were employed during fieldwork which included participant observation and visual participatory methods.

Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG). For this study, a group of four children including two autistic children formed the Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG). The group consisted of three boys and a girl. The children were between the ages of 5–10. The role for these children in the CRAG were as advisors, rather than co-researchers. The purpose of the CRAG's involvement was to gain an understanding of the social context and experiences of the children in the school generally, as well as things that were important to them. This insight assisted to guide and sharpen my understanding of the school culture and processes from a child's view, prior to carrying out actual observations in the classroom. Research methods were also explored with the group to identify methods that would elicit the most involvement and the CRAG provided feedback on the arts-based activity that was planned for the main participants in the study. Children who formed the CRAG were from the same school, allowing for the cultural and social context to be consistent, although arguably children would have different views and experiences on the same school. Therefore, a mixed group of

children were included in the CRAG that had diverse interests, abilities, ages, and year groups. Thus, given autistic children are not a homogenous group, a diverse CRAG was established to inform the research process.

The CRAG meeting commenced with an introduction of the purpose of the research and the importance of CRAG. All of the CRAG participants indicated consent to be present and demonstrated an understanding of why they were there. The meeting began with a discussion of the school, things that the CRAG children enjoyed or disliked about the school, and what they thought other children enjoyed. Some of the things that the CRAG indicated were important to children in school included sports, having friends, being kind, not being bullied and not feeling under pressure. The CRAG engaged in creating an artwork with the materials provided depicting their 'life at school' (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Artwork by CRAG Participants

The children were also given the option of engaging in writing, talking, or engaging in any mode of communication they preferred. While one of the participants eagerly set to drawing, two other participants struggled with the ambiguity of the broad topic and required clarification and support from a teacher-aide present. However, these participants were keen to "make something about school to tell you [the researcher]" (Fieldnote entry, 28.07.21) and one of them drew a garden shed and the other created a 'kitty' [kitten] using pompoms. On engaging in discussion, it was revealed that the garden shed was a place where the child would "hang out with friends" (Fieldnote entry, 28.07.21), while the kitty was a toy that was in the classroom. Another participant did not appear keen to be involved in the artwork; he preferred

to walk around the room and talk with me. Acknowledging the child's possible dissent, I reminded him that he did not need to engage in the artwork and instead could talk to me if he wished. We engaged in conversation for a few minutes, after which he requested to go back to his class, to which I promptly agreed. The other three children spoke about enjoying the activity. The feedback was generally positive. A child noted that, "Other children can also enjoy it but sometimes they may not like to do it all the time" (Fieldnote entry, 28.07.21). The children also made suggestions on the materials such as having more variety of stickers to denote various things in schools and their interests.

Engaging in the art activity and discussion with the CRAG provided useful insights into the methods to be used in the main study. The CRAG reiterated the need to be responsive to the individual child's needs and interests. The interaction with the children involved in the CRAG and subsequent feedback emphasised that one size does not fit all when it comes to participatory methods as was evidenced by the varying interests in the activity amongst the children. It also stressed the need for children's descriptions of the artwork and their views to be elicited to avoid interpreting the artwork through the researcher's bias and associated assumptions. For example, the garden shed drawn by one of the children as a place for hanging out with friends was not something that I had considered, until he explained it to me. Further, based on the involvement of the participants with the topic of the activity, I became mindful of the fact that a broad topic, 'my life at school', might be too ambiguous for some children and a decision was made to adapt this activity.

Participant Observation and Informal Interviews. This study involved participant observations of the two autistic children in their schools for two school terms (18 weeks, approximately 324 hours of observation) as the primary method of data gathering. Each term was 10 weeks in duration, however, due to a COVID-19 lockdown in New Zealand in 2021, observations could not be carried out for two weeks. The observation also included informal interviews, a key component of ethnographic research (Fetterman, 2020), which took the form of spontaneous conversations with the children as they engaged in their daily school activities and interactions with their classmates. Conn (2014) has suggested several examples of open-ended questions that can be used to explore the social experiences of children with and without autism and these were incorporated as an initial guide in this study. Questions included "what do you like?", "what do you not like", "what are you doing?", "what happens next?", "what is your favourite?" (p. 136). Many instances of the informal interviews with the participants took

place while I joined in with the children during lunch or morning tea, seated on the classroom mat, or while engaged in play after being invited by the children to be a part of the game. The observations and conversations with the children were also supported by informal interviews with parents, teachers, and teacher-aides. The conversations with teachers and parents provided important contextual information as well as unique insights into the children's social world. The importance of gathering contextual information from parents and teachers has also been noted by other researcher (Conn, 2015; Hill et al., 2016). Detailed, and where possible verbatim, notes from these informal interviews and conversations during the course of observation were maintained in my fieldnote journal. Care was taken to ensure that children's voices and views were foregrounded, and adults' perspectives were not privileged over those of the children.

Visual Participatory Methods. This study made use of visual participatory methods, specifically arts-based methods that aligned with the participants' interests, to complement the primary method of participant observation. Such non-verbal visual methods present a challenge to "voice-based forms of children's participation" which has been the dominant discourse (Horgan et al., 2017, p. 278). This is especially significant for research with children who may not have the verbal or cognitive abilities to contribute to traditional methods such as interviews (Davidson, 2017).

The use of participatory visual methods and interviews is multi-faceted, and multi-dimensional when engaging children and young people because it is essential that the methods selected match the individual needs of autistic young people, and these will vary (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Harrington et al., 2014). For this study, child directed arts-based activities were incorporated based on the children's social experiences at school followed by discussions and reflections on the artwork created by the participant, which was audio recorded. Bland (2012) asserts that such triangulation of the data is extremely important, and the drawings created must be accompanied by a verbal or written description because of the potential for adults to draw incorrect interpretations. Based on the experience with the children in the CRAG, a broad pre-determined theme such as 'my life at school' was avoided. Instead, the activities completed by the children reflected matters they wanted to share or had indicated as important in their everyday context.

During the initial home visit as part of the informed consent process, I was able to gauge the interests and hobbies of both children, supported by insights from their mothers. James' mother reported that he loved drawing and working on projects, while Harry's mother reported he demonstrated a keen interest in crafting. An understanding of their interests (from their mothers' perspective) was a starting point to ensure that the participatory activities planned were aligned with their preferences. Once I came to know the boys themselves, these were adapted to their needs and interests on the day.

The children in this research were also given the option to co-construct and narrate the activity with family or a teacher-aide as this was shown to be effective in supporting children's engagement in the research process (Stafford, 2017); however, both the participants chose to complete the activities on their own. Recognising that at times children may prefer verbal conversations or have other preferences over participatory methods (Vindrola-Padros et al., 2016), they were given the opportunity to complete the activities any way they wanted, including drawings, creating a collage or a model, writing, typing, or talking. Concurrent with other research with children, activities were reflexively and flexibly adapted to suit the child's preferred and habitual ways of communication (Stafford, 2017; Tickle, 2017). Given that craft work and drawing was a favourite activity for both participants, they chose to draw and/or write in most of the sessions. However, in some instances, the two boys requested that only an interview be done without any art-based activity. Vindrola-Padros et al. (2016) highlight that providing different alternatives enables children to participate in a manner that they are comfortable with. Reflexivity employed in participatory data collection methods is further discussed in Chapter 4.

Several variables can impact arts-based data and these are acknowledged. Bland (2018) draws specific attention to factors such as supervision or presence of a teacher, time available to complete the artwork, materials provided and the space where the activity is conducted. In this research, concerted efforts were made for each activity session to ensure that the space was comfortable and quiet for the participants, away from the hustle and bustle of the core of the classroom activity, but always in a visible and nearby area or section of the classroom. At times, the children preferred to remain in the classroom while completing activities, and this was respected. Efforts were also taken to ensure that the research activities did not interrupt the children's learning. Art materials were provided including colour pencils, crayons, colour papers, glitters, and stickers. Some of the choice of materials provided were updated following

feedback from the children in the Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG) such as an increased range of stickers. Throughout fieldwork, further materials were added as per suggestions or requests by the children. For instance, James requested for 'googly eyes' to be included while Harry requested a specific colour of paper (red) to denote things he disliked in school. A summary of the methods used for the main study is indicated below in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Methods of Data Collection Used in This Study

Method	Data type	Format
Participant observation (researcher and child-directed)	Fieldnotes	Written
Informal interviews with participating children during observation (researcher and child-directed)	Fieldnotes	Written
Informal interviews with parents/teachers/teacher-aides (researcher and adult-directed)	Fieldnotes	Written
Visual arts-based methods (researcher and child-directed)	Observation of the activities by the researcher	Written
	Photos of materials produced by participant	Visual
	Interviews and discussions (audio recorded)	Transcript

3.4.4 Research Integrity

Qualitative studies are judged for effectiveness and rigour using criteria that are different from those used in quantitative research (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend nine validation strategies that can be employed in qualitative research and suggest that researchers adhere to at least two of the strategies:

1. Corroborating evidence through triangulation of multiple sources.
2. Discovering negative case analysis or disconfirming evidence.
3. Clarifying researcher bias or engaging in reflexivity.
4. Member checking or seeking participant feedback.
5. Prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field.
6. Collaborating with participants.
7. Enabling external audits.
8. Generating a rich thick description.
9. Having a peer review or debriefing of data and research process. (pp. 259–263)

This study employed five of the nine strategies proposed by Creswell and Poth (2018) including: triangulation; engaging in reflexivity; using member checks; collaborating with participants; and generating and providing thick descriptions. These strategies are discussed below in the context of the alternative terms proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to establish the quality of qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba suggest that four criteria together contribute to the "trustworthiness" of the study (p. 300). These criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability and they parallel the criteria used in quantitative research—internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, respectively.

Credibility in this study was established through prolonged engagement in the field and regular participant observation of the children. Triangulation of data sources from children, parents, and teachers as well as the use of multiple methods further contributed to the credibility of this study. Self-reflection also formed an important part of supporting credibility, through maintaining a detailed reflexive researcher diary, which often merged with the fieldnotes diary, to evaluate subjectivity and biases.

The findings of this study are not intended to be generalised to other children, schools or contexts. However, transferability is supported by providing thick descriptions, enabling readers to make judgements about the possible transferability of the study to other children and in other settings that share similar characteristics (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability is a concept often used to counter reliability. This occurs when "one seeks dependability that the results will be subject to change and instability" (Creswell & Poth,

2018, p. 256). To establish this criterion of trustworthiness, researchers are encouraged to engage in a reflective auditing process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study employed this criterion by using member checks with children, with teacher-aides and teachers, and with parents, to ensure that I represented the data in an authentic and meaningful way. Ambiguities in notes made during data collection were checked the following day with the participants of the study. An account of the methodological decisions made was recorded as a reflexive memo.

Similar to dependability, confirmability is also established through a self-reflective and evaluation process, alongside a continuing review of the data. This entailed ensuring that my personal values and beliefs did not influence the children or teachers, and that subjectivity was identified and accounted for. As the researcher, I constantly checked the emerging data with the research questions and also engaged in discussions around the data, and the emerging analytic themes, with my supervisors.

3.4.5 Researcher's Position

This section highlights my role as the researcher within a classroom, and some tensions experienced in navigating my different roles. Three examples from the fieldwork are presented to illustrate some of the challenges encountered as an adult researcher in a school setting. Historically, several writers have spoken about the roles fieldworkers take on in research with children in ethnographic research including the 'adult friend role' (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988) and the 'least adult role' (Mandell, 1988). Christensen (2004) observed the "on-going balancing act between being recognised as an 'adult' and at the same time avoiding the preconceived ideas, practices and connotations associated with 'adulthood' or specific adult roles" (p. 174), and suggested the adoption of an 'unusual adult' role, underscored by a genuine interest in understanding the children's experiences without assuming the position of a 'child'. For the children in this research, my role as an adult researcher was *atypical* in that my role was not one the children would typically encounter at school. I was neither a teacher-aide nor a teacher, and yet interacted with the children during their learning.

In this research, I opted to position my role in the classroom through openness and authenticity. I was an adult in the classroom but also a university research student, and one who did not have adult authority as a teacher. This was communicated to all the children in the classroom before data collection and to the children who were the main participants in this

study, who came to know me as just Vani. However, my position and roles within the classroom were not marked by clear boundaries and often changed depending on the context, as illustrated below.

Example 1: Negotiating Roles in the Classroom. During the initial few days of fieldwork, I spent time mostly as a "*minimally participating observer*" (Bryman, 2012, p. 443), engaging in brief conversations with the children, their peers, and the teacher, and familiarising myself with the classroom routines. I was acutely aware of myself as a researcher who was sitting in the corner of a classroom taking notes. Having not yet established full rapport, I was unsure of how to 'be'. However, as I continued with my classroom observation and became familiar with the classroom systems, I increasingly adopted the role of a *participating researcher observer* where I joined in with the children's activities.

Navigating my role in the classroom involved reflexively thinking about my position—in the physical sense within the classroom context and in terms of my role as an adult researcher in a classroom. For instance, as I began fieldwork, I struggled with where to position myself in the classroom. As noted in an early fieldnote:

> *I quickly said good morning, and today I took a seat on the floor on the mat with the children. Yesterday I was mostly sitting on chairs around the classroom even when the children were on the mat for mat time or circle time. I felt a bit awkward when sitting on chairs and observing; it felt like surveillance, although the children didn't seem to be too bothered by it. (Fieldnote entry, 03.08.21)*

As my involvement in the social worlds of the classroom increased, my position in the classroom also shifted from the peripheries to being more involved. As is typical in an ethnographic approach, I joined in with the routines of the classroom. At times, I would be a helper around the classroom, tidying up alongside the children, or I would sit with the children during mat time. Very often I would join the children at their lunch table, usually eating with them and engaging in conversations. These lunchtime conversations became instances of rich insights into the children's social worlds. In addition to navigating my physical presence, I was also negotiating other roles in the classroom. For example, on one of the days, the children were involved in a 'make your own necklace' activity:

The children are told that they can draw a picture of whatever they want on their charms, and the teacher asks me if I would be okay with helping the children string the beads, make a knot etc. For the next hour, I am caught up in the excitement of making the necklaces and I am enjoying myself. The hour passes in a pleasant bustle as children are moving around from one station to the other and I am surrounded by children asking for help with stringing their beads and charms. I engage in my observation of Harry involved in the task by himself, whilst also helping the other children. (Fieldnote entry, 01.12.21)

Despite my intentions to adopt a role of 'no authority' in the classroom, the children viewed me as a supporting adult who could help them with their necklace. This was very apparent when I was helping the children with using a 'hot glue gun' which they were told could only be operated with an adult present. During my time in the classroom and in situations such as the 'make your own necklace activity', I encountered occasions where I would be approached by children often with a complaint about another peer or of a conflict in the group. I reminded the children on such occasions that I was not a teacher and encouraged them to talk to their classroom teacher. In the example below, I was sitting alone in the classroom catching up on my fieldnotes during lunch break. As a general rule at this school, children are not allowed to be in the classroom during breaks:

While I was sitting in class and working on my fieldnotes, a few girls came in and started chatting with me. After some time, I asked them if they were allowed to be in the classroom. They replied that they could if there was a teacher present (indicating to me). I told them that I was not a teacher and they would have to ask their class teacher permission if they wanted to remain in the class. They left the classroom. Some time passes and a boy comes in who is crying and sits down on the floor leaning on the wall, sobbing uncontrollably. I asked him if he was alright to which he replied that somebody had pushed him and it was hurting. Checking that he was not bleeding or visibly hurt, I suggested he get a drink of water and go to the office to let them know that he was in pain. Reluctantly he made his way outside and I kept a watchful eye to make sure he made his way to the office.

> *Once the classroom teacher was back, I let her know about him. (Fieldnote entry, 22.09.21)*

Children were usually quick to interpret my role as that of a teacher, or in a few cases, a mother of a student. Unsurprisingly, given that I was an adult, children would implicitly assume that I had the authority of a teacher and therefore could resolve conflicts with peers. They were often surprised to learn that I did not have a 'teacher role' that they were used to and could not make decisions concerning them. On the other hand, in a situation where a child was distressed as in the example above, I opted to step in and respond with care, until such a time that another staff member could be identified. While my role as an adult who was not exercising any authority was initially confusing for the children, eventually, over the course of fieldwork, my position became more familiar to them. Thus, the everyday environment of the school often interacted with and influenced the researcher roles that I adopted.

Example 2: Encountering Conflicting Expectations. There were times I found myself having to balance my position with the children with that of the expectations of other adults in the classroom. These instances became sources of tension for me. While I was very hesitant to break out of my 'no authority' role with the children, I was at times faced with requests by teachers to help out with a conflict or in managing the class. In the illustration below, a substitute teacher has taken over the class for the day. She had been informed of my role and presence in the classroom. I talked to her briefly about my research when we met, and I had received her verbal consent:

> *The relief teacher did not seem to be completely aware of my exact role or she was overlooking my role as a researcher and viewing me as another adult who can help in the classroom. I was taking a bit of responsibility around the classroom, for example, during reading time, she requested my help to get organised with the children and she gave specific instructions to the children to come see me after they were done with their reading. I was to guide them to get any book of their choice and engage in individual reading silently. (Fieldnote entry, 08.10.21)*

In this situation, I became uncertain about my role with the relief teacher as I was inevitably exercising some authority as an adult, even though in previous instances, I had

communicated to the children that I was not in authority. The teacher was in the midst of setting up for this reading session, and I was hesitant to approach her to discuss my position in the class. I respected the teacher's requests for help and tried to be of assistance to the children using only minimal authority. This proved to be a challenge as 'silent reading' was not always interpreted as such by some of the children. Thus, in my role as an adult researcher, I was often navigating and negotiating my role with *both* children and adults in the school. This is consistent with the experience of Canosa et al. (2018) who reflected on such negotiations of multiple roles in their ethnographic and participatory research with children.

Example 3: Relationship with Participants. To Harry and James, I was simply known by my first name, Vani. However, over time I was also referred to as a 'friend' by them when being introduced to others. I did not take on the role of, or imply that I was a friend initially; this role came about organically, determined by the children, and shaped through the experiences we had. These instances blurred the boundaries of my role as a researcher, while also foregrounding the importance of the relational nature of the research:

> *On our way, Harry said, "I wish you would be here next year as well, we have become such good friends now." I felt touched by this and I told him, "Unfortunately, I can't…as you know I am doing a research project, so I need to go back and finish it up." We went back to class after getting his shoes, and when I was about to leave, Harry hugged me goodbye. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 21.11.21)*

The children's perceptions of me as a friend was situational, because there were times when the children perceived me as an authoritative adult. An example is shown when James had previously introduced me as his friend, who happens to be an adult, to some of his peers, but this view was amended on one occasion:

> *When the bell rang, I remained in the classroom writing up my notes before heading out for the break. James was playing in a 'cardboard box house' that he had made and as it was breaktime, his teacher asked him to leave the classroom. When he refused, she lifted the box house over him and put it away. James started screaming and crying. He remained in the classroom and after a while, scrunched up his face, pointed a finger at me and his*

teacher, and said "I am upset and angry it's all your fault". The teacher later explained to me that it was triggered when she took away his box house and since I was also present, we were grouped into the same category. It was a slightly difficult afternoon for me where I was caught in the middle of a conflict that James was experiencing. Having been in the classroom for a few weeks now, I was very unsure of what to do when James reacted in the way that he did towards me. This was the first time I had frustration directed at me, although I had seen it directed at his teacher multiple times before. On this day, I believe there was a shift in my position as viewed by James; I had become an adult who imposes rules and restrictions, as opposed to an adult who is his friend. However, I note that this view of me did not remain when I returned to class the next day and he was back to joking around and inviting me to join in his games. (James, fieldnote entry, 15.09.21; 16.09.21)

As a researcher in a classroom, these instances were unsettling and raised ethical dilemmas. Drawing on Lundy and McEvoy (2012), Stokes (2020) reflects on her research with children and brings attention to the fact that researching with children inevitably leads to the formation of a relationship, with the relation "imbalanced in favour of the adult…one of the ongoing dilemmas of researching childhood" (p. 382), and this was reflected in my own experience researching with children. During the process of informed consent, Harry had expressed his awareness and understanding of my presence in his classroom for just two terms. Nevertheless, after the first instance I described above, although I felt touched, there were issues with regard to the relationship that Harry perceived. The incident with James and the 'box house' reminded me once again of the issues of power operating in the classroom as an adult researcher. In this case, through discussion with the teacher, I decided to stop observations for the day and respect the child's desire to be alone, as conveyed through his withdrawal to another room following the incident. Before beginning observations the next day, I spent some time with James engaging in casual conversation and also checking he was comfortable to have me present on that day. I also reminded him that he could stop participating anytime. James' positive responses to my 'checking in' combined with my observation of him in the morning, where he was engaged in the classroom activities energetically and happily, assured me of his assent to continue participation. These were "ethically important moments" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 262) that provided an opportunity to reflexively think about my position as a researcher.

This section discussed the research methods that were employed including the process of entry, participant recruitment, the role of CRAG, and the specific participatory methods embedded within an ethnographic approach that was utilised in this study. I also highlighted the ethical dilemmas, and tensions that can arise as an adult researcher role in the classroom. In the next section, the methods employed in the analysis of data are presented.

3.5 Data Analysis

Qualitative research generates rich and comprehensive data sets and the analysis stage involves preparing and organising the data, coding, and finally representing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) identify the process of qualitative data analysis as involving an ongoing "data analysis spiral" that consists of the following five "loops": "(i) managing and organising the data (ii) 'memo-ing' emergent ideas, (iii) describing and classifying codes into themes (iv) developing and assessing interpretation, and (v) representing and visualising the data" (pp. 185–86). This constitutes the first layer of analysis and the second layer will involve using specific procedures developed for the methodological approach.

Ethnographic studies require analysis to be both iterative and inductive throughout the research process (Fetterman, 2020; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This enables both contextual and individual factors to be considered in the social lives of these children. This study uses three aspects of data analysis namely, (i) description (ii) analysis and (iii) interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Wolcott, 1994). First, this involved writing a description of the school and classroom culture and settings. The starting point is a "straightforward description of the settings and events" (Wolcott, 2009, p. 27). Second, the analysis takes place which comprises displaying and highlighting certain findings, reporting procedures undertaken during fieldwork, and foregrounding patterned regularities. A prominent analytic technique utilised in ethnographic research is the identification of patterns or themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, data from a combination of the child's interviews, observations which were supplemented by informal conversations with adults, and artefacts, contributed to the development of the emerging themes. Interpretation and analysis often go hand-in-hand and in this study, findings were interpreted within the context of the researcher's experiences and in the larger context of scholarly literature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Even so, Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) highlight that "there is no formula to be followed for the analysis of ethnographic data" (p. 167).

The data analysis for this study began during data collection with the writing of fieldnotes and analytical memos during observation and was ongoing until the write-up of findings and its consequent discussion. The observations and fieldnotes regarding each of the two participants were maintained separately to ensure that their individual and unique experiences were foregrounded. Traditionally, analysis has been understood as a step after the collection of data. However, Miles et al. (2014) highlight that the process of simplifying, coding, and developing themes from data, a process they refer to as "data condensation", happens throughout the research process, beginning even before the actual collection of data (p. 12). Similarly, Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) also state that analysis is not a distinct stage in ethnographic research:

> Analytical thinking begins in the pre-fieldwork phase, in the formulation and clarification of research questions, and continues all the way through to the process of writing reports, articles, theses, books, and other products. Formally, it starts to take shape in analytic notes and memoranda; informally, it is embodied in the ethnographer's ideas and hunches. And, in these ways, the analysis of data feeds into research design and data collection, just as they feed into it. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 167)

This study incorporated the aspects of description, analysis, and interpretation recommended by Wolcott (1994). However, although these steps were followed for this study, they were not linear, and an iterative approach was taken between the different stages. This was reflective of the cyclical nature of qualitative data analysis and, in particular, of an ethnographic analysis. Analysis was done manually on hard copies in the initial stages and a data management tool (NVivo) assisted with later analysis.

3.5.1 First and Second Cycle Coding

The fieldnotes for each child written down during data collection were read through at the end of each day and preliminary ideas were noted on the margins. I transcribed the interviews at the end of each week of observations and initial ideas were written down. This was completed manually in order to immerse myself in the raw data. The children's artworks were included within the fieldnotes to reflect the data collection method where the art activities were embedded within the children's daily lives in their classroom. The contextual information,

and the children's own descriptions and explanations of the artwork, were important, and this was present in the interview transcripts or noted down in the fieldnotes.

Codes are labels that are attached to sections of the data "that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, and/or evocative attribute" to the data (Saldaña, 2021, p. 33). The initial jotting down of key ideas formed the preliminary codes which constituted the first cycle of coding (Miles et al., 2014). The first cycle codes were written up for each child separately. This also included codes related to the methodological aspects of the study. During this time, analytic memos were also written, some of which would later guide my thinking around the key findings and themes. Analytic memos involve higher level thinking that extends beyond mere description and is reflective of the researcher's thought processes (Miles et al., 2014). In this study, writing memos involved a continuous process that occurred throughout data collection and analysis, and this was a valuable tool to reflect on the methodological process in particular. An example of an early stage memo is shown below which is a reflection on observations of the children's play:

> *The pop culture artefact was once again facilitating the game, but I was thinking–don't other children also play with props and artefacts, why is this any different? Could it be because Harry's play with other peers seems to be mostly when there is an artefact that HE came up with or built?—need to observe this further, is this always the case? (Memo, 27.09.2021)*

Coding was an iterative process. Engaging with the fieldnotes and noting down initial codes in an ongoing manner provided the opportunity to go back and check some of the initial ideas that I was developing with the children, their teacher or their mother, which guided further analysis of data. Analytic notes, emergent ideas, and questions were also discussed with supervisors during supervision meetings. An example of the initial first cycle codes is shown below:

> *Harry: Solo play; Lego; fantasy; picking on; toys; "his own time"; sharing; self-choice*
> *James: Minecraft; Lego club;"quitting", imagination; change in routine, withdrawal, playing with others*

The second cycle of coding involved organising the first cycle codes into smaller categories or themes (Miles et al., 2014). Once data collection was completed, the fieldnotes were once again read through, with initial codes modified and/or categorised under broader codes that captured the main meaning behind each of the codes. This was also completed manually, and further analytic memos were added. An example of this stage of coding is presented below (Table 3.4):

Table 3.4

Example of Second Cycle Codes

Second cycle code	Harry	James
Play	Solo play Parallel play Group play (with one other or multiple) Fantasy / Imaginative play Toys & artefacts Pop culture Problem solving and creativity Technology	Solo play Group play (including siblings) Participation in organised games in class Artefacts and self-made creations Pop culture and Minecraft Lego club

3.5.2 Development of a Flexible Coding Framework Using NVivo

Following the second cycle coding, the next step of analysis was undertaken using NVivo software. This was because using NVivo enabled the organisation of fieldnotes, analytic memos, and the interview transcripts for each child separately, but also enabled comparison to be made across both children. A coding framework to be used within NVivo was developed based on the initial first and second cycle codes and the fieldnotes were further read through and coded in NVivo (See Appendix A). However, it was important that the patterns or themes developed organically and inductively, so the coding framework was flexible, and evolved and changed during the course of analysis.

NVivo tools such as 'queries' enabled the linking and visualisation of the data across the different data sources. This aided in exploring patterns in the data for each participant in-depth and between both participants. Using NVivo also enabled the same 'chunks' of data to be coded under multiple codes (NVivo term: nodes), which further supported analysis. All of

the data were coded for the context of observation (playground/classroom/breaktime), in addition to their respective codes.

3.5.3 Findings and Interpretation of Data

Coding in NVivo resulted in 15 main codes each containing sub-codes. The findings regarding each of the children's social experiences and the methodological processes involved, as well as the eventual interpretations, were developed from these 15 codes using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Writing on ethnographic data analysis, Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) states that in the constant comparative method:

> The analyst examines each item of data coded as belonging to a particular category, and notes its similarities with and differences from other data that have been similarly categorized. This may result in a vaguely understood category being clarified, or perhaps being divided into several more clearly defined ones. Also, sub-categories may be identified. (p. 177)

This comprised the third round of coding where the 15 NVivo codes and corresponding sub-codes formed the basis for the different findings discussed in the next two chapters (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5), and the overarching themes presented in Chapter 6. I explored similarities and differences in the coded data within each of the codes overall (i.e., consisting of both children's data), and for each of the children separately. The 'queries' in NVivo facilitated this process, however, analytic thinking and organisation of different codes also occurred manually. Interpreting the emergent themes involved situating them in the context of the literature review. An example of the development of codes to the final interpretive themes is shown below (Table 3.5). The findings and themes were developed in conjunction with analytic memos that were recorded throughout the data collection and analysis procedures.

Table 3.5

Example of Theme Development

	Guiding codes	Key findings	Theme
Harry	Description of friends and peers Desire for friendship/Companionship Loneliness and aloneness (or lack of) Hobbies and interests Peer-initiated interactions Perceptions of others Conflicts and resolution Instances of exclusion Desire to be alone	Dynamic perceptions of friendships	Friendships as multidimensional
	Spontaneous interactions Peer initiated interactions Hobbies and interests Play with others Instances of inclusion Desire for friendship/companionship	Making connections	
James	Description of friends and peers Desire for friendship/companionship Loneliness and aloneness (or lack of) Conflicts and resolutions Hobbies and interests Perceptions of others	The many facets of friendships	
	Emotions and moods Coping strategies Loneliness and aloneness Instances of inclusion Instances of exclusion Unpleasant interactions	Emotional insights	

The findings of each of the children’s social experiences are presented separately in Chapter 5. This is done to account for the richness in each of the child’s experiences and to allow their individual story to be foregrounded. In the next section, the two participants and their social settings are introduced. This provides a context for the ensuing discussions around methodological processes (Chapter 4) and the children's social experiences (Chapter 5 and Chapter 6).

3.6 The Research Participants

3.6.1 Participant 1: Harry

Harry, an autistic boy, was 5-years 10-months-old when he consented to being a participant in this study. He lives with his mother, and commenced school at the end of 2020, however, remained in the same classroom for the new academic year beginning 2021 as he had just started becoming familiar with his teacher and the school context. His teacher stated that in the early stages at school, he demonstrated multiple behavioural outbursts including screaming and hitting. However, over time his behaviour significantly changed in that such instances of outbursts reduced. His mother elaborated that he does have “blow-ups” triggered by other students, however, he showed more self-awareness of his emotional states. His mother also indicated that, on one occasion he returned home and said, “I was in control today” (Harry’s mother, personal communication 18.09.21). Harry loved dinosaurs, Lego, signing, reading, and engaging in crafts, and he frequently visited the local public library with his mother. My initial impression of Harry was that of an active, energetic, and friendly boy, who was eager to talk to me about school, and his likes and dislikes. He was affectionate and had hugged me goodbye after I visited his home during the initial informed consent process.

Harry’s Classroom and his Social World. On the first day of observation, I walked into the classroom and Harry was seated on the mat with the rest of the class listening to a story. Having met me before at home, Harry turned around and smiled, raised his hand, and announced, “That is Vani!” Once story time was over, the teacher briefly introduced me to the class as a ‘researcher’ who “wanted to find out some things about children’s experiences in their classroom” (Fieldnote entry, 03.08.21). She explained that I was a student at the university, and I was learning about children’s experiences in their classrooms. The children

then dispersed, some settling down with toys and colour pencils, and others joined the teacher for reading.

Harry's classroom was one of two classes situated in a block separated by a corridor and a coat room. These two classes were for new entrants to the school, that is, five-year-old children beginning their compulsory education. The number of children in Harry's class at any given time varied as classes were often merged and/or groups separated for various classroom activities. However, on average, the classroom consisted of around 20 children. Harry's classroom consisted of a spacious main room, where the walls were decorated with children's artwork and examples of learning activities that they were involved in. The walls also had pictures of the children engaging in different activities in the classroom as well as some 'rule sheets', such as rules about using the iPad. At the very front of the class was a whiteboard and a teacher's chair. To its right was a 'jellybean' shaped table, where groups of children engaged in their literacy or maths tasks, with their teacher at the centre. Across the room, there were three large tables arranged in rows with chairs around them, where the children sat when they engaged in activities such as drawing or other classroom tasks, as well as during their morning tea and lunch. The main room also had an alcove at the back which consisted of a 'Lego table', strewn with innumerable Lego pieces and half made Lego constructions such as cars and towers. Attached to the main room was a 'resource room', where the children were only allowed to be in the presence of a teacher. Adjoining the main room, another similarly sized playroom was located that the children referred to as 'the green room', owing to its green paint. The green room consisted of small tables, not arranged in any particular order, big containers of different types of toys such as dolls, trucks, and train sets, huge wooden construction planks and slats, a mini 'home set' and a cupboard full of costumes, including pirates and Disney princesses. This was where the children spent a significant amount of time, when not engaged in academic tasks.

In the main room against a wall, was a desk with the chair facing the wall. On my first visit to the classroom, the desk was scattered with little pieces of paper, a glue stick, and scissors and had a drawer from the corners of which I could see more papers in them. This was Harry's desk, or as his mother called it, "his own little space" (Harry's mother, personal communication, 27.07.21). Harry himself referred to it as his crafting table. During my time in the classroom, Harry's table was always covered with remnants of his current project. Harry was usually seated there every morning when I came to the classroom.

Harry conceptualised his classroom as a "lollipop land" during an art activity session where he made an artwork of his classroom. He loved crafts, and his creativity and imagination were evident during the time he was part of the research as shown in Figure 2 and the extract below:

Figure 2

Harry's Classroom (Artwork by Harry)

Harry: I am going to tape pom poms.
Vani: Why did you put pom poms?
Harry: Because I wanted them to look like a Mario mushroom! The kids are goanna be eaten by Mario mushroom! And I am smiling! (indicating to himself in the drawing)
Vani: Oh! Why are you smiling?
Harry: Because I am going inside the lollipop land (giggling) and candy land (gesturing to his classroom). (Harry, interview, 22.11.21)

Harry's inventive and creative capabilities were a powerful facilitator of his social interaction with peers, which will be discussed in forthcoming chapters. For Harry, the best part about school was "having to play*"* and what he did not like about his classroom was "having to clean up" (Harry, interview, 09.11.21). He refers to the quiet room (the resource room) as his favourite place, however, clarifies that he is not usually allowed to be there unless accompanied by an adult. His least favourite place in the classroom was the green room (i.e., the playroom) "because it is so loud!" (Harry, interview, 22.11.21).

By the time official data collection started, the children had been in the classroom together for two school terms, and many social groups and conventions had been established. The children were familiar with the routines of the class, and rules regarding play such as waiting for one's turn with a toy and requesting politely for toys. Over the course of observations, it became evident that certain groups of children almost always played together, sometimes merging, and blending with another group when the play developed or when the game required a greater number of participants. A few children usually occupied themselves with drawing and painting, typically beside others who were doing the same activity. Harry's role within this social world was dynamic, although, a significant amount of time was spent in solitary play (Figure 3):

> *Today, I came into the classroom to find Harry deeply engaged in making a "Steve costume", Steve being a character from Minecraft, an online game he enjoys playing. This was his crafting project for the week, and he was thoroughly engrossed in making the different intricate parts of the costume. The teacher had set up playdough on one of the big tables, and there was a lot of excitement amongst the children at the prospect of getting to play with it. After completing the required classwork, the children were allowed to choose what they wanted to do. Almost the entire class was playing with the playdough at the main table and the room was full of children's excited squeals and laughter. In the midst of this, Harry chose to work on making the arms and legs at his crafting table. He asked me for help with cutting up some paper, and we spent some time working and re-working the costume so that it would fit him perfectly. When the costume was almost finished, a couple of boys approached us. This led to a very animated discussion, between Harry and the two boys, following which they started pretending to fight and jump over obstacles, simulating the online Minecraft game. After about 5 minutes, Harry was back at his desk colouring in the costume, while the other boys continued with the game. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 03.11.21)*

Figure 3

Harry's Steve Costume

Harry was not always observed engaging in solitary play; at times he would venture outside of his 'crafting bubble' for some time but soon would draw back in and continue with his project. I construed these moments of engagement with his peers during playtime as a temporary pause within his private world of play.

Harry appeared to make a deliberate decision to engage in solitary play; he was self-assured and was always decisive about how and with whom he wanted to spend his playtime. In most instances, he engaged in craft activities by himself and did not specifically seek out others to play; he declined even when invited by others to join in on their games. For instance, once one of the boys actively sought him out to show him a game involving toy trucks. As I observed, the child came close to Harry and repeated, "Harry come on! Harry, follow me!" This was met with silence and then eventually a resounding "no" from Harry. The child remained persistent and brought over the toy trucks which Harry looked at briefly before going back to his colouring. A few minutes later, Harry commented:

Harry: [Child] is always trying to play with me.
Vani: Why do you think he is always trying to play with you?
Harry: I don't know.
Vani: Why don't you like to play with him?
Harry: I just don't like playing with him.
Vani: Who do you like playing with then?

Harry: I like playing by myself.
Vani: Oh... why is that?
Harry: Because it's cooler (Harry, fieldnote entry, 13.12.21)

This was verified by his teacher who commented, "Harry is usually happy playing by himself, I have noticed that he is happy to be a lone player" (Harry's teacher, fieldnote entry, 20.10.21). While during many instances of observations, Harry appeared to play on his own, other observations revealed Harry's very dynamic involvement in the play culture, highlighting that he engaged in different ways within the social situations of the classroom. The observations indicated that Harry was not actively part of any of the shifting or established social groups in the classroom, yet he also enjoyed instances of play with his peers at times.

3.6.2 Participant 2: James

James was 8-years-old when he commenced participation in this study. He is an autistic boy in Year 4 who lived with his mother and his siblings. James had an older sister, and a younger sister at the same school. His teacher mentioned that upon beginning school, he would only play by himself or with his sisters and needed his own space and toys. As per his teacher, James has had difficulties in school connecting with peers. His mother also commented that the previous year, James was very hesitant to go to school as he did not have any friends and faced issues in the classroom. James loved learning new things and his mother said that he frequently picked up non-fiction books such as "how to" over fiction books.

James' Classroom and his Social World. James' class consisted of a big room, with a smaller 'break-out' room attached to it, located alongside two other classrooms. These classrooms often merged for activities with groups of children moving across different rooms. At any given time there were approximately 20 children in the classroom and at times, these included children from other classes. The main room had a whiteboard and a TV at the front of the class. Spread around the classroom were a few tables with chairs around them, where the children sat while completing their classroom tasks. The walls had charts and pictures related to the topic the class was studying which changed every few weeks. Shelves against one wall contained children's belongings including their books and lunch boxes. In the corner of the room, was a basin where the children washed up after painting or artwork. The teacher's office was also located adjacent to the classroom. It was an enclosed space with a door and a

big glass window that looked into the classroom. Typically, this was where James and I spent time creating artwork or engaging in interviews.

The social groups within the classroom were already established in the first two school terms, prior to my data collection. My initial impression of James on the first day of my observations was that he did not seem to have any friends in his classroom. Most of the other children sat together in groups during tasks and activities, however, James struggled to fit in with a group. Below are notes from my observation of a math game on my first day in his classroom:

> *Math happened in two groups. While one group was with the teacher, the other group was asked to be in groups of 2's or 3's and play the 'Star Trek' math game. The Star Trek group, that includes James, quickly gathers the materials for the game and gets together in 2's and 3's. James appears to be unsure of where to go. He is looking and walking back and forth between a few groups. Finally, he approaches two girls who are sitting close to where I am and asks one of them, "Can I play with you?" which is ignored. He moves away again and considers where to go before eventually coming to me and saying, "I don't have anyone to play with." I asked him what happened with the girls. The girls hear me and then give James some instructions to get some materials which he promptly goes and grabs. But when he returns, they have already started playing. He looks at me again. I am in a difficult position as I don't want to overstep my boundaries as a researcher even as I feel bad for him struggling to find a group to fit in with. Eventually, I asked him "Do you want to play with me?" He grins widely and enthusiastically says "Yes!" I am surprised by his enthusiasm and wonder about what usually happens on other days. (James, fieldnote entry, 02.08.21)*

Later in the day, I asked his teacher what James does in situations involving group work. His teacher commented, "He struggles usually, most of the time he goes to one of the gentle girls, because the boys can get quite loud for him and may not put up with his behavioural characteristics." (James' teacher, fieldnote entry, 02.08.21). Over the next few weeks, I observed James in similar situations where he usually sat by himself and completed

the tasks. On a few occasions, I observed James screaming or crying. On one such occasion, his teacher said, "When he gets like this, the other children go [*gestures with head turned and two hands pushing away*]. They don't want to engage with him, and the next day he says that no one wants to play with him, but he isn't really helping himself" (James' teacher, fieldnote entry, 17.08.21). I asked his teacher if he knew what the triggers were and he explained, "I think he is tired and just bored. At home, I think he is always on Minecraft whenever he has nothing to do, so … here when he is bored and not allowed on Minecraft…usually reading works, but today it just didn't" (James' teacher, fieldnote entry, 17.08.21). His teacher further added, "James usually has a meltdown around then… if that happens, I suggest you stay back and observe because he will look at you for support" (James' teacher, fieldnote entry, 17.08.21).

The above example showed a teacher-directed activity where he guided the children to work in groups or pairs to complete the activity. However, sometimes the children formed groups voluntarily around activities they enjoyed. Even in these instances, James was typically by himself:

> *One of the tasks is to take a picture of themselves pulling a funny face and write a description. I see that the other children are enjoying themselves taking funny pictures—there is a lot of laughter and experimentation with different funny faces as well as silly banter. They cluster around in different groups looking at each other's funny pictures. I observe that everyone except James is in a group. He is by himself taking pictures with different filters on the iPad. (James, fieldnote entry, 23.11.21)*

James' mother mentioned that he experiences loneliness very intensely. She called it a "loneliness cycle" where he feels lonely and so he does not reach out to anyone which further amplifies his loneliness (James' mother, personal communication, 20.07.21). Even though James appeared to find it difficult to fit in with a group, he constantly made efforts to try and join with his peers' games and conversations. While in many instances he was unsuccessful, on other occasions he was welcomed and included by his peers. Typically, this happened with girls:

There was a group of 4–5 girls who were sitting on the mat and playing with some tokens. James went over and asked them, "Can I join?" and the girls readily agreed. He spent the next 10 minutes with them, and they were making different patterns with the different coloured tokens. The teacher saw their tokens and said, "That's a really creative thing to do!" before announcing that it was clean up time. While they were putting the counters away, I heard James tell the girls, "Hey maybe we should all do a big picture of… tomorrow" and the group began talking about the various patterns they could make with the tokens. (James, fieldnote entry, 18.10.21)

Nevertheless, these instances of genuine inclusion were often sporadic, and James was frequently left to be by himself in the classroom. A few weeks into my observations, I began noticing that James would regularly go to the classroom adjacent to his and spend time with a few boys there. As I became more familiar with James and the general classroom environment, he began speaking to me about his friends from the other classroom including naming them and referring to them as his best friends. His friendships are explored further in forthcoming chapters; however, this was revealing as until now, the observation had suggested that James did not have any friends. As the weeks progressed, James' relationship with his friends from the other class, their many instances of interaction and play, and conflicts and resolutions, became more apparent. On asking his teacher about his friends from the other class, she commented,

James was in the class with the boys last year. They were a group of 5 boys, but they were 'diabolic' sometimes, especially when it came to doing their learning, so they were split up this year. James and another boy came to this current class [where I am doing my observations] but the other boy left, so James was the only one from the group in this class. Initially, at the beginning of the year, he would only play with his younger sister, but then she made some friends and he mostly stuck to himself, even when he paired him up with a buddy, however, now he spends time with the boys from the other class. (James' teacher, fieldnote entry, 29.11.21)

James often spent break time with the class next door, rushing out to join his friends when the bell rang. During summer, James' class usually sat on the ground right outside of

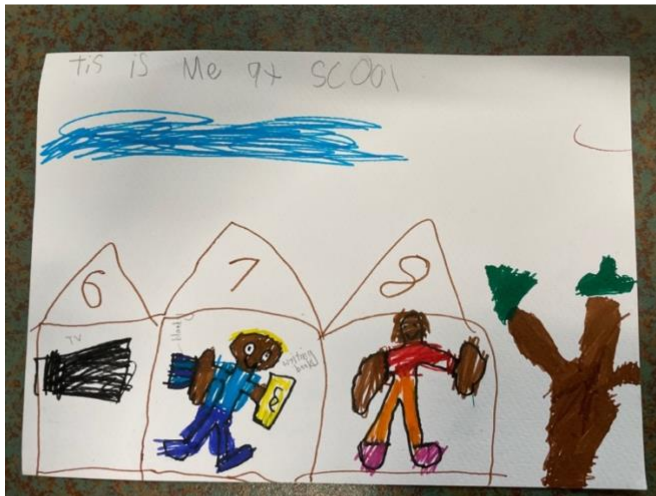
their classroom and the children from the other class would be on the ground in front of their classroom. On the far side of the ground was an elevated platform. James and his friends from the other classroom would converge on the platform during breaktime and have their snacks together while engaging in some games:

> *James and his friends are sitting on the platform. James had asked me to join them there. They are having their snacks and playing a 'quiz game' based on the TV show 'Squid Games'. A boy asks a question and they have to hit their fists on an imaginary button A, B or C in front of them. I ask James why he likes coming here and he says, gesturing around with his hand, "Because my friends are here." The discussion in the group has changed to Minecraft versions. They are debating between the normal Minecraft version and another Minecraft version. I decide to make my way back to class at this point, but when I leave them, the boys have started up a chorus of "Minecraft! Minecraft!" (James, fieldnote entry, 16.11.21)*

During an interview session, James drew a picture of himself at school, marking out the classrooms. He indicates himself in the classroom marked 7 and his friend in the classroom marked 8. Despite having friends in the other classroom, James' description of his life at school is marked with challenges with peers. In the interview excerpt below, he is talking about his 'blankie' that he brings to school, which is included in the picture below (Figure 4):

Figure 4

James at School (Artwork by James)



Vani: Oh why do you like bringing it [blankie]?

James: Because it's special and when I got it, I was younger, yeah I was like I was six.

Vani: Ok...tell me a bit more about that. Tell me a bit more about why you bring it to school.

James: ummm…because I feel scared sometimes.

Vani: Why do you feel scared?

James: Because sometimes people bully me and I just don't like it, I get too scared.

Vani: Can you tell me a bit more about that?

James: It's like people saying, "You can't play with me", " I don't like you", "I hate you."

Vani: Other children in the class say that, is it?

James: Not in Class 8 or Class 6.

Vani: Can you tell me what bullying means?

James: When they hurt your feelings.

Vani: That's not really good is it? Well, I am sorry about that. So, does the blankie help you?

James: I just cuddle it sometimes, take a deep breath and walk right in through them.

Vani: That's a really good strategy. Who told you about these strategies?
James: I made it by myself. I would talk to the bullies, "Why are you bullying?" and then I would sort out the problem by myself without a teacher.
Vani: So, what do you say to the bullies then?
James: Why aren't you being friends? Because this school is about sharing and being kind, not bullies… sometimes…but if they are too hard, like if they are bullying me then I just ask a teacher. (James, interview, 08.11.21)

James insists that there are no 'bullies' in the other classes, indicating that his struggles with his peers were in his classroom. James also differentiates between his friends and peers. For instance, he identified his 'friends' as the ones from the other class and corrected me when I referred to one of the girls from his class as his friend:

Vani: Yes, I saw that you were building a sand city today.
James: Yeah…we had to destroy it.
Vani: Who were you building it with?
James: [names girl]…. but she's not my friend…she's just like…but I also have two [friends] over there in there [pointing to the class next door.]
Vani: So, you were building the sand city with them…so why did you say [girl] was not your friend?
James: Oh,…she is just in my class. (James, interview, 11.29.21)

This section highlighted James' social world as being multi-faceted. He faced challenges and struggled to be included at times in the classroom. James' position in his classroom was observed to typically consist of orbiting on the periphery of the social groups, although he strived to be included and, in a few cases, became part of a social unit temporarily. On the other hand, James enjoyed close friendships with a few boys from the other class.

3.7 Summary

In this chapter, the methodology and the specific methods used by this study were discussed. An ethnographic methodology was adopted, and participatory approaches grounded within this methodology were utilised during data collection. A Children's Research Advisory

Group offered insights into the participatory data collection methods. Ethnographic observations and interviews were conducted with the participants, and visual art-based participatory methods, aligning with the children's needs and interests, were used to complement the primary data collection method of observations and interviews.

Ethical considerations were paramount during the course of the study and the children's right to assent and dissent were monitored and respected throughout data collection. Research trustworthiness and credibility were established by triangulating the data, checking emerging findings with the participants, creating thick descriptions, and through my own researcher reflexivity. Data analysis was conducted as an iterative and cyclical process, where three cycles of coding and analysis supported by the constant comparative method led to the development of overarching themes. In the following chapters, the emergent findings and themes from the data analysis process are presented.

Chapter 4

The Children's Role in the Ethnographic Research Process

An ethnographic methodology allowed the participants to fully explore and explain their social experiences in this study, and allowed me, as a researcher, to develop non-normative understandings of their experiences. Three important aspects of the ethnographic process facilitated the findings regarding children's experiences: (i) following the child's interest (ii) engaging in reflexive partnership, and (iii) meaningful researcher engagement in the child's world through time. Thus, the methodological processes that are discussed below contributed to an understanding of the children's worlds as *they experienced it.* However, the irony that their experiences are presented by an adult researcher and discussed through an adult lens is acknowledged.

This chapter focuses on the findings specific to the methodological processes employed in this study that enabled Harry and James' stories and social experiences to be foregrounded. Drawing on research fieldnotes and interviews with the children, and their mothers and teachers, this chapter explores how I used the methods to reflexively engage with the participants in the field. Specifically, it shows the children's active role in contributing to the data collection on their terms. The findings are presented alongside discussion, to situate it in the context of existing literature around involving children in research.

4.1 Methods in Action

Graham et al. (2016) contend that in research with children, "reflexivity offers a means by which participatory methods can be analysed to reveal the ethical nuance inherent in the creative processes used to invite and engage children in the research" (p. 86). This section outlines how the methods were employed in the field and reflects on unanticipated encounters that required researcher flexibility and responsiveness when engaging with the children. Drawing on relevant literature, considerations in adapting methods in the field, encountering ethical moments, and addressing unexpected situations are highlighted. The children's active role in guiding the research is emphasised.

4.1.1 Adapting 'Planned' Methods

During the process of data collection, there were unexpected moments that diverged away from the 'planned' methods to engage with the children. For instance, the initial plan of action, as outlined in the procedural ethics for this study, was to complete a one-hour activity session where the children could create artwork that depicted their life at school. Alternatively, they could write, speak or express their experiences in any manner of their choice, and this was to be followed by a recorded discussion. Given that both participants enjoyed art and craft work, the activities in this study were mainly art-based (see Chapter 3, section 3.4.3). After spending several weeks being a participant observer in the classroom, I became acutely aware of the children's interests. I also became cognisant of the fact that a one-hour engagement with the child would prove difficult for the child's attention. This was supported by observations of Harry and James who engaged in classroom tasks for approximate durations of 15–30 minutes and often moved between different activities within the dynamic classroom environment. However, this was not a rigid rule. For example, it was also observed that Harry engaged in certain activities of his own choosing and interests for longer time periods. Thus, given that both Harry and James had unique needs depending on their interests and the context, a decision was instead made to do the activity and interviews in little 'chunks' of time to cater to their differing attention spans. Such opportunities arose and were followed through spontaneously whilst also being mindful of the children's preferences and needs *in the moment*. Further, a different approach to the activities was considered that would be based on more focused themes reflective of the children's daily experiences in a way that is emergent during the course of observation, instead of a single broad topic. As indicated earlier, this was also supported by my experience with the CRAG participants where it was seen that an art activity on a broad topic such as 'life at school' was too ambiguous for some of the children.

Adapting the methods to reflect the children's spontaneous and everyday experiences proved to be a successful approach as James and Harry were able to tell me when they were ready and keen to do the art activity and choose what they wanted to do, enabling the adoption of a responsive approach to ensure that the children were comfortable in the process of research. It gave the children the opportunity to make active decisions about when, where, and how they wanted to engage with the process of research. It also afforded me the opportunity to engage reflexively with the children's individual interests and preferences, while keeping the broader aims of the study in mind. For instance, James indicated that he had a keen interest in

comic books. This was also supported by his mother's comment during our initial meeting that James "absolutely loved comics" (James' mother, personal communication, 20.07.21). Thus, aligning with his interest, together we engaged in making an artwork in the likeness of a comic book layout that depicted a school play he was part of a few years ago. The different 'panels' represented different scenes (James, fieldnote entry, 16.11.21, see also section 5.2.4).

The flexible and 'in the moment' approach to the activity also enabled matters that were important to the children to be foregrounded by providing them the opportunity to determine what they wanted to tell me and be included in my 'project'. For example, on one occasion, I was approached by James who informed me that he wanted to talk to me about the library and asked that I turn on my recorder; we then spent some time discussing the library as one of his favourite places in school on account of it having lots of books and he identified it as a place he feels happy in (James, fieldnote entry, 08.11.21). A flexible approach was also a way to uphold children's right to assent and dissent and also offset the power differential by providing an opportunity for the children to participate on their own terms.

The sequencing of the art activity and interview was changed as a direct result of the children's interaction with the research. Initially the 'plan' was for the art activity to be completed first followed by a discussion which would be recorded. However, I quickly became mindful that instead of this sequential approach, the children freely and comfortably engaged with me while doing the activity, rather than after it, and thus the data collection approach was modified to reflect this. This enabled the conversations and ideas to flow as the children created their artwork. Consistent with the recommendations made by Rossman and Rallis (2017), playing or engaging in activities with the children while interviewing is beneficial for the children. Thus, although diverging from the planned course of action was initially unsettling, I found that engaging with the methods in a flexible and mindful manner enabled broader perspectives and experiences to be captured, which may not have been possible otherwise.

All of the activity sessions with the children in this research developed into spontaneous moments rather than being pre-planned and "merged with the everyday-ness of children's lives" (Chesworth, 2018, p. 852). It was initiated either by the children or myself in discussion with the children when an opportunity arose. We engaged in activities in settings that were determined as per the children's choice and comfort. It was essential that the children were able to share their stories in a space that they considered safe and inclusive. Sometimes this

involved conversations in settings that would typically be considered unconventional, including for instance, seated together under a small classroom desk (James, fieldnote entry, 28.09.21). Usually, I began each activity by engaging in a few minutes of casual conversation ranging from how their day was going to Minecraft and Star Wars. This allowed the opportunity to re-establish rapport and connection and ensure the participants' comfort. At times, this was also followed by a few minutes of 'free drawing', where the children could draw or write whatever they wanted, providing an opportunity for them to settle down and be comfortable. Often, I would draw alongside them while sitting on the classroom floor, or we would make up a game with playdough, while engaging in conversations, before moving on to an activity or discussion about their school life. While in many instances, I provided the probe to begin the activity (e.g., "Tell about the games you were playing this morning"), the activities were mainly steered by the children themselves who would determine what they wanted to share. For example, once James requested that he make a drawing about "things that make me happy, sad and both", and proceeded to draw three columns on a piece of paper labelling each of them with an "emoji" sticker (James, fieldnote entry, 30.11.21).

4.1.2 Upholding Children's Right to Dissent

The ethics of involving children in research is a critical area, in part because a child's understanding that they have the right to withdraw at any time is related to the issue of power, and children must be given opportunities to withdraw from research through providing safe and reassuring environments (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). Consistent with ethical considerations outlined in Chapter 3, continually monitoring children's informed consent was important given the prolonged nature of the data collection in this study.

In addition to the formal procedures for informed consent, children's body language also provided insights into the nature of their consent. For example, during certain instances of data collection where the children were engaged in an art activity for the study, it became evident after a while that they were keen to go back and join the rest of their class. Although the participant had verbally assented to engaging in the art activity, I reminded them that they were welcome to stop the activity at any time, as is seen in the instance involving James:

> *About 5 minutes into the activity, he noticed that the rest of the class was on the mat and looking at the TV screen where the 'roll monsters' were*

displayed. The monsters representing each child would be getting points for best behaviour and he was pointing to it and exclaiming. Mindful of the consent process, I checked with him to see if he wanted to go and join them and reassured him that it was completely okay to stop. He replied that he was okay with continuing the activity. He did some drawing for around 5–10 minutes, but then I could see that he was distracted as he was looking at the class every few seconds. I decided to stop the activity for now and once again reminded him that he was welcome to go back and that we could pick up the activity at another time if he chose. Reassured, he left to join his class. (James, fieldnote entry, 16.11.21).

These instances where children's non-verbal language were continually monitored provided the opportunity to ensure that children's right to dissent at any stage of the research was respected. Another strategy to ensure informed and ongoing consent, was a regular 'check-in' with each child at the beginning of the day, prior to and during any activities, and at the end of the day. On the same day as the above extract, at a much later time, we restarted the art activity again (Figure 5). In this instance, James' verbal as well as body language indicated that he was excited to be doing the activity at this time (Figure 5):

I also reminded him that the pictures of what he makes would be added to my project and other adults would read it and he said… "Children too…so that they can learn about how autism is for me and others!" I asked him again if he wanted to go ahead with making a comic and with a big grin and fists pumping, he said "Yes!!" (James, fieldnote entry, 16.11.21).

Figure 5

Cover Page of James' Comic (Artwork by James)

Not only did this establish James' assent but it also assured me of his understanding of the research and that his consent was as informed as it could be. This was seen through his understanding of the purpose of this study and the impact it will have on other children. As Guillemin and Gillam (2004) write, when the subjects of a research project take up the goals of the project as their own, "they become *participants* in the research rather than *subjects*" (emphasis in original, p. 271). Within this study, it was indicative of the child's role as co-researchers.

Similarly, ensuring informed consent also meant reiterating to the children that they could *change their mind* about agreeing to undertake any specific research activity. Whilst this was specified in the formal written consent process, it was also vital that the children were actively reminded of this. This was important, as within the school context, children were expected to follow through on rules and expectations that were implemented by a teacher. For example, this is reflected in situations where Harry was expected to complete an ongoing task after 10 minutes of playtime break, and this would be communicated to him by his teacher. This study was situated in a school context, and this meant that there were specific school and classroom rules and expectations in place. Harry may have assumed that the same rules applied to the research process, and verbally agreeing to do a research activity would have to be followed through. Although there was still the need for adherence to the school rules, Harry's engagement with the *research* process had to be on his terms, and so it was important that he was reminded of his right to dissent within the research. In some research situations, Harry's

verbal and non-verbal behaviour would indicate consent, however, when reminded he could change his mind without any consequences, Harry would sometimes opt to continue the activity at a different time. Thus, being attentive to children's verbal and non-verbal cues, as well as reiterating their rights in the research process frequently, ensured that their right to consent or dissent was truly respected. This reiteration of their rights was important especially because children may find it challenging to discern research expectations from school or classroom rules that they routinely follow.

4.1.3 Responsive Inquiry During Divergent Interview Moments

Chesworth (2018) highlights that focusing too much on the stipulated methods while engaged in research may restrict, rather than enable, children's participation in research. In researcher engagement with children, methods must be engaged with reflexively (Chesworth, 2018). Instances of unanticipated situations were frequent during fieldwork. A divergent moment during an interview process is shown in the following example. During one of the activity sessions, Harry was engaged in drawing "things I like at school" (Figure 6). This came about as a direct result of a conversation where he spontaneously talked about some of the places in the school that he liked:

> *I asked him if he would like to engage in an activity for the research project about the things that he was telling me about. He enthusiastically agreed to this and proceeded to write the word "TOYS" across a sheet of paper and draw his "crafting table" next to it. He then promptly declared that he was done. Following a very brief discussion on his artwork, he asked me if he could now draw characters from 'Minecraft', an online game in which he was highly interested. I was slightly disappointed as I was hoping to get some rich insight into his likes and dislikes at school. However, I agreed, and not expecting any 'data', I turned off my recorder and we began chatting about the game. While talking about Minecraft, he revealed that he played 'Minecraft manhunt', a game similar to tag but based on the Minecraft characters that he made up, with another girl in class. I promptly switched on my recorder with his permission as I wanted to know more about how he interacted with this girl in his classroom and he began telling me about the game. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 16.11.21)*

Figure 6

Harry's Crafting Table, Toys, and Minecraft Characters (Artwork by Harry)

The discussion that followed after our brief conversation about his likes and dislikes at school was unexpectedly based on the Minecraft drawing Harry made. This example highlights the critical importance of following children's leads and interests on what they wanted to share, something Chesworth (2018) refers to as "embracing uncertainty" (p. 852), instead of imposing pre-determined requests and questions. It enables valuable insight into children's worlds—in this case, it led to a conversation about Harry's make-believe Minecraft game with another girl during lunchtime, something that I had not observed and would have missed out. This was important as it showed an example of how Harry engaged with peers in his class, within the context of his specific interests. Aligning with Canosa et al's (2018) reflection on their experiences of working with young children as co-researchers, these unexpected instances in the present study provided opportunities to "conceptualise participation from their perspective, from a *child perspective*" (p. 407, emphasis in original).

4.1.4 Glimpsing Into the Social Worlds of Children

Given that participant observation is an integral part of ethnography (Fetterman, 2020; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), regularly being present in the classrooms with the children offered several opportunities to be a part of their world. However, as a researcher, this sometimes required a proactive approach to recognise such instances, relinquish the adult lens, and engage with the children in their world. This was indicative of being a participant observer

at a deeper level, that is, *within* the child's world. For instance, during observation, it was noticed that Harry took on several 'identities' based on cartoon or pop culture characters. One of our conversations together followed the character of 'Dream', a popular YouTuber:

> *Harry came up to me to say hello wearing the 'Dream' mask from yesterday. I said, "Hello Harry!" He playfully made a pouting expression and didn't respond. I then realised that he 'wasn't Harry' as he was wearing the mask. So, I said, "Hello Dream! How are you? Have you seen Harry?" Harry smiled at this and suddenly took off his mask laughing and said, "I am right here!" (Harry, fieldnote Entry, 20.10.21).*

Later in the day, Harry once again approached me wearing the mask:

> *Harry: Is there someone looking for me?*
> *Vani: I am not too sure Harry!*
> *Harry: Who is Harry? I am Dream!*
> *Vani: Oh! Sorry, Dream! No, I haven't seen anyone.*
> *(Harry goes back to his table and comes back without his mask.)*
> *Vani: Oh Harry there you are!"*
> *Harry: Yeah, I am looking for Dream…have you seen him?.*
> *Vani: Yeah… I did…I know him.*
> *Harry: Oh ok!*
> *(Harry puts on his mask once again.)*
> *Harry: I heard there is a little boy looking for me, do you know who he is?*
> *Vani: I am not too sure…*
> *(Later, when he takes off his mask)*
> *Vani: Hey Harry, Dream said that he knows a boy is looking for him, should I say it's you?*
> *Harry: Oh! Yes, you can tell him! (Harry, fieldnote entry, 20.10.21)*

While the conversation in the above example might appear difficult to understand or follow to another observer, I could logically follow Harry's thinking because of the familiarity I had developed with Harry's interests through extended engagement in his world. Harry also took on different identities while interacting with his peers. Such deeper level participation and

observation revealed the role of such identities in Harry's interaction with his peers, which is further discussed in the next chapter.

4.2 Ethnography: Rights-Informed Approach to Foreground Children's Experiences

The instances of the data collection process highlighted above are illustrative of the everchanging realities of the children's social world and, by extension, of the research process. This section highlights the value of an ethnographic methodology in understanding autistic children's experiences, through emphasising the importance of understanding and appreciating the child within their contexts**.** Three aspects of the ethnographic process that enabled this are now explored and placed in the context of a rights-informed approach whilst researching with children.

4.2.1 Following the Child's Interests

Within this study, the children's voices and experiences were foregrounded to enable their narratives, understandings, and experiences to be portrayed. Children's right to express their views and have them taken seriously, enshrined in the UNCRC Article 12, is not limited to their role as participants in the research but extends to their engagement as co-researchers in the research process (Lundy et al., 2011). In addition to the participants who formed the Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG), the children in this study played an integral role in leading me through their interests to parts of their world that they *chose* to share. As a researcher, I played a conscious role in authentically following the child's interests on their own terms. This approach required many hours of observation and regular participation in the classroom with the children to enable their stories to emerge naturally and understand them in context. Participatory methods situated within an ethnographic methodology facilitated this prolonged engagement with the children.

Being aware and setting aside pre-conceived ideas of what I would 'see', 'hear' and 'find' when engaging in fieldwork became a critical starting point. At times, my ideas as a researcher, of what children's social experiences 'ought to be', were informed through engagement with literature as well as from my past experiences working with autistic children in classroom settings. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) state:

> In researching settings that are well-known to the researcher, a rather different problem is likely to arise: it can be difficult to suspend preconceptions, whether these derive from social science or from everyday knowledge. (p. 86)

In hindsight, untangling existing expectations from the unexpected moments encountered in the field was a difficult process and a potentially risky one, but highly rewarding. Meeting with the CRAG provided the initial opportunities to reflect and challenge the beliefs that I held about engaging children in research. However, it was only through encountering unanticipated moments in the field, that I was able to authentically engage with the child's views and follow their lead in terms of how they wanted to engage with the research. Such instances were frequently encountered during the data collection process. Interviews with Harry often took on different tangents with Minecraft often being a favourite topic of conversation. However, empowering and enabling children to determine *what* they wanted to share and *how* they wanted to share it ensured their participation as co-researchers, and also provided rich and nuanced insights into their world. Such insights may otherwise have been overlooked or dismissed as negligible by a researcher (White et al., 2010). Following Harry's lead on conversations about Minecraft, and creating and sustaining the space for him to talk about it within the research interview process, offered insights into his social interactions with peers that were facilitated through his interest in the game. Thus, both the methods used, and the data that emerged were not pre-determined, but guided by the children's actions and interests, and this became the focus of analysis. This provided valuable insights into their world as the children experienced it rather than my interpretations of how their world could be described and re-represented to adults.

Furthermore, upholding children's rights also involved following their lead in the informed consent process in this study. Informed consent was conceptualised as a process that was ongoing and negotiable throughout and this extended beyond a formal written consent. Children express their preference to stop or pause when engaging in the research (i.e., their dissent) in several ways, and respecting and acknowledging their right to dissent strengthens the informed consent process (Bourke & Loveridge, 2014). In this study, several instances provided the opportunity to re-assess the child's participation, such as the incident with the 'roll monsters' as reported in section 4.1.2 (James, fieldnote entry, 16.11.21). Although James had given his ongoing verbal consent, his body language at the time indicated some uneasiness.

In such moments of uncertainty, it was imperative that the child's demeanour was understood and respected to ensure their right to dissent was offered. As an adult researcher, it was also essential that I support the participants to realise their rights to have their views heard and acted upon. Concurrent with advice from other researchers (e.g., Ahsan, 2009; Bourke & Loveridge, 2014; Dockett et al., 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2011), this was in part done through being attentive to the children's non-verbal behaviours and ensuring that they had multiple opportunities to reconsider their participation in an ongoing manner. However, in addition to being attentive to verbal and non-verbal cues, it was also necessary that the *invisible* aspects influencing consent were examined, such as those relating to children's understanding of rules and expectations that were a part of the educational context. This is seen, for example, in some instances where Harry may have felt obligated to follow through on participating in research activities as reported in section 4.1.2. Thus, to ensure that children were supported in having their views heard and acted upon, it was essential that I routinely emphasised their right to withdraw, even momentarily, at any stage.

Lundy (2007) argues that four critical aspects need to be considered in order to guarantee the full significance of the UNCRC Article 12 (1989) on a child's right to have their views heard and taken seriously by adults: "(a) space: children must be given the opportunity to express a view in a space that is safe and inclusive, (b) voice: children must be facilitated to express their views, (c) audience: the view must be listened to, and (d) influence: the view must be acted upon as appropriate" (p. 933). This study aligned with Lundy's framework within an ethnographic context by actively and purposefully acknowledging and following the child's lead, in terms of *what* they wanted to share (perspectives and experiences) by being invited to be a part of their experiences, *how* they wanted to share it (data collection methods), and *when* they wanted to share it (ongoing process of informed consent).

4.2.2 Engaging in Reflexive Partnership

Assessing and re-assessing children's role as authentic partners in the research process is critical to ensure the rights of the child are acknowledged, and their right to represent their own experiences is upheld. Throughout the research, I constantly reflected on both their and my role in the research. An ethnographic approach facilitated this process by providing regular opportunities to reflect on my role as a researcher and the role of the participants by asking 'Whose voice is being heard in this instance?' In order to foreground the child's views, it was

critical that throughout the research, this question underpinned both the data collection and analysis stages. By confronting my own existing biases and ideas and actively striving to foreground children's voices, there was a better chance that the children's right to be heard was upheld.

Reflexive partnership was enabled only through the process of mutual respect and trust; both core principles in a participatory approach (Pellicano et al., 2017). In order to prevent the tokenistic involvement of children in this study, trust and authentic partnership between myself and the children were built up over time during the 18 weeks of intensive fieldwork. In this study, respect was inherently demonstrated through following the child's interests as discussed above. Respect and trust in the child's views were also shown through actively engaging and listening to them, recognising their experiences as valuable in and of itself to the children. As Nancy Mandell (1984) argued in her seminal work on participant-observation research involving how children negotiate meaning, "this required I neither judge nor evaluate their [children's] action" (p. 194). This was difficult, and it is acknowledged that in some instances, I unwittingly attempted to interpret their experiences through my own lens and expectations.

A critical look at the notion of 'whose voice is being heard?' was reflected, in the methods that were used to gather children's views. Suspending my expectations of, and adapting the methods was important to ensure that it was the child's representation of their experiences that was coming through. The need to suspend preconceived notions while engaging with children is consistent with other literature (e.g., Canosa et al., 2018). In the context of their ethnographic research with young people on their experiences growing up in Australia, Canosa and colleagues (2018) state that only after shedding their "academic preconception" were they able to engage with the children authentically as co-researchers and understand their nuanced experiences (p. 407). Thus, without the reflexive reassessment of the children's role in this study and the methods to be used, it is likely that the dominant voice would have been my own. This speaks to the ontology of multiple realities and the need to purposefully shift the adult gaze through which children's worlds are viewed to a child-centred lens. The choice and use of methods in educational research require flexibility to embrace the uncertainty that comes with researching with children (Chesworth, 2018).

Respect and trust were also established by acknowledging the power imbalances in my relationship with the children. While participants' interests, and following their leads, were

prioritised during the data collection process, it is acknowledged that the research questions were pre-determined and the children did not take an active role in the data analysis. Given the fieldwork took place in a school setting, there were limitations with how and when the children participated in the research, and within the school context, there were inherently pre-determined rules and expectations. However, recognising and interrogating the power imbalances during data collection as well as during the analysis stage after data collection, provided valuable moments of critical reflection to question the notion of voice.

I also showed respect for the children during the research process by ensuring that it was only through *invitation by the children* for me to be a part of their world that I engaged with their experiences. Being invited by the children meant I played multiple roles as a researcher: at times I became an 'alien snowman' (James, fieldnote entry, 15.09.21), or engaged as a 'character' in their make-believe world such as Harry's world with 'Dream'. Aligning with the process of consent, this also meant respecting when children *did not* want to share an experience with me. Being invited by the children ensured that they were sharing their world with the researcher and guiding the research process whilst also reducing the power differentials between us, as the researcher and the participant. This approach supported the recognition of children as rights holders by enabling them to negotiate their engagement in the research process (Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2015). Critically, this was possible only through time in the field as this facilitated the development of trust and rapport between myself and the children.

Within this study, trust between the child and I was actualised as a two-way process—the researcher trusting the participants and the ethnographic process, as well as the participant children trusting the researcher and the research. A significant moment of the children's recognition as partners in the research process was when James commented that adults and children can read about his experiences in my (the researcher's) 'project' so that "they can learn about how autism is for me and others" (James, fieldnote entry, 16.11.21).

4.2.3 Meaningful Researcher Engagement Over Time

Ethnographic research is distinguished through prolonged *authentic* researcher engagement in an aspect of the lives of the participants in order to foreground the emic perspective or the insider perspective of reality (Fetterman, 2020; Hammersley & Atkinson,

2019). The process of engaging with the child's interest through reflexive partnership described above was possible because of the extended research time in the field. I was involved with the children in their school for 18 weeks, three to four days a week. This afforded me an in-depth understanding of the two children individually and enabled me to engage and share each of their experiences on their terms with reciprocal trust and rapport. This meant that instead of being a researcher briefly stepping in and out of the child's world, my ongoing presence enabled them to get to know me as a person and as a researcher. We could co-create a shared space of understanding where they recognised themselves as valuable partners in the process.

Whilst initially the children were less active in guiding the research through their own interests, over time they started to approach me with what they thought was important to include in my 'project'. They led me, sometimes literally holding my hand, to places that were meaningful to them. At other times, they spontaneously provided explanations or elaborations in anticipation of my questions. Given that I was not merely 'gathering data', but instead had the children actively identify what data was important by sharing and contributing their stories, the children took up the research as their own. Such an involvement in their world was critical, as it revealed a deeper understanding of several aspects of the children's social experiences that would otherwise have been disregarded. For instance, interacting with Harry who had taken on the character identity of 'Dream', enabled me to understand the distinctive way in which he utilised different role-play identities in order to socialise with his peers. Utilising traditional interviewing methods alone may not have revealed his unique and nuanced approach when interacting with his peers.

Another important aspect of being in the children's world for an extended time was the way in which it provided authentic and unplanned opportunities to join in on their ordinary conversations. Given that these conversations between children were spontaneous and child-initiated, it provided wider insights into the child's world in terms of what was important for them and what emerged in a natural manner. This meant that I was able to understand facets of the children's social worlds which I had previously not considered. For example, when joining in on conversations with Harry and other children during lunch break, I became aware of how he connected with others through making plans for future play based on common interests (Harry, fieldnote entry, 21.09.21). Such immersion in the children's worlds and conversation was also possible because I had become a familiar presence in the classroom to the children and their peers.

When thinking about Lundy's framework (2007), upholding children's right to have a voice through the elements of space, voice, audience, and influence, were demonstrated in this study. Further, the added dimension of *time* was critical to support children's rights and to enable their voices and experiences to take centre-stage. Given that I engaged with the children over many weeks, the children were able to share their stories in their own time, and over time, in a manner that was comfortable for them within the research space. This enabled opportunities to understand the children within their worlds, as initiated, guided, and negotiated by them. As a child in a study by Gallagher and Lortie (2007) stated, "You'd better stay a long time if you want to learn something about us…" (p. 405) and this is a strong message from children on the value of time when researching with them.

4.3 Summary

This chapter highlighted the important role played by the children and their interests in guiding the research process. These findings demonstrate that following the child's interest and lead about what they want to share, and how they want to engage in the research process creates a greater likelihood that their participation becomes one of co-researcher. Moreover, the ethnographic methodology allowed for reflexive and flexible engagement with the methods used and aligned with critical elements in the ethics of research, such as the informed consent process. Notably, researcher engagement and time in the classroom working alongside the children allowed for the development of an authentic and trusting relationship between the children and myself as the researcher.

The findings relating to the children's social experiences within their classroom as discussed in the next chapter, when taken alongside the methodological processes discussed within this chapter, are inextricably linked. It was only through the children's active and meaningful engagement in the research process that a rich understanding and portrayal of their social lives as experienced by them could be presented.

Chapter 5
The Social Worlds of the Children

This chapter presents the findings regarding the varied social experiences of the two autistic children in their school and the distinctive and creative manners in which they navigated these experiences. In Chapter 3, the boys' classroom and the dynamics of the social world within the classroom were presented. Building on this context, each child's social experiences with peers are presented separately to foreground their unique experiences. Given that the children played an active role in guiding the data collection in this study, the findings presented are mainly indicative of the experiences that were important to the children, that they had communicated to me through informal conversations, non-verbal cues, or at times, direct requests to be included in my 'project'. Illustrative vignettes, derived from the classroom observations and recorded in the fieldnote data, are used to highlight the different themes. To maintain confidentiality, the names of other children in the classroom are excluded.

5.1 Harry's Social Experiences

This section focuses on Harry's social experiences. The ways in which Harry navigated the social world within his classroom and school are presented in the following themes: (i) agency and negotiation in play, (ii) dynamic perceptions of friendships, (iii) socialising through different identities and roles, and (iv) making connections.

5.1.1 Agency and Negotiation in Play

Typically, Harry was a solitary young person at play. Although he preferred and enjoyed playing on his own in many instances, on several other occasions he also engaged in joint play with other children within the classroom. Play with other children involved creative collaborations and instances of his own teaching and learning. Conflicts with peers, and subsequent resolutions, were also negotiated during these interactions.

Creating Unique Worlds. The following vignette was observed during 'free play' time in the classroom where the children could choose an activity to engage in by themselves or with other peers. Most of the children in the classroom were playing in groups while a few

others, including Harry, were at their desks engaged in arts and crafts. However, as was typical during playtime, the children moved often between different activities and play groups. The below extract shows how Harry initiated and sustained rich and inventive play with his peers, guided by his personal interests (Star Wars movies):

> *Someone has left a long piece of tape nearby. Harry, sitting at a table colouring next to [a child], takes the tape and attaches it between two tables. This initiates a game of jumping over the tape or going under the tape. Harry and [the child] work together to make the tape 'stronger' by sticking more tape on both ends, engaged in a lively conversation. The two of them continue with their game of jumping over the tape and a few minutes later, another child drifts over to join them. Harry decides to set a password. The password is his name and he readily shares it with the newcomer. The rule is that they just have to say the password to jump over the tape. Harry makes up rules as they go: "Only me and [child] don't need a password because we made it."*
>
> *The game evolves and Harry makes a 'lightsabre' to defend the 'tape' which now represents the entry to a castle with a princess inside. To make the lightsabre, Harry grabs long sheets of paper and rolls them up, makes a handle and colours it in. I help out with taping bits and pieces, but I can see the other children looking to Harry for guidance on making the lightsabres. Harry readily gives suggestions. Once [the child] finishes making the basic frame of the lightsabre, he says, "Look at mine, Harry, I can defeat you with it," and they engage in a pretend sword fight. Soon, more children join in. Looks like they are attracted by the novelty of the lightsabres. Harry goes over the procedure of the passwords and then directs the others on the construction of the lightsabres. The game has evolved again to include 'guards' and one of the girls asks Harry if she can be queen and he the king. The children making lightsabres clamour around Harry to show him what they have made. Harry and the children are now deeply engaged in their play of defending the castle with their lightsabres, with Harry giving out orders and instructions. Harry's teacher-aide soon comes by to pick him up to go get his afternoon medicines. However, he tells her that he does not want to leave. After a few seconds, reluctantly, he follows her looking back at the*

castle. The other children continue playing but in a few minutes stop, come over to me and ask,"Is Harry coming back soon?" (Harry, fieldnote entry, 16.08.21)

This vignette demonstrates Harry's initiation, participation, and active engagement in play with his peers in the classroom. Harry and his peer had initiated a game with a long piece of tape, highlighting how the children creatively used a simple object to transform the play into a sophisticated and innovative one. It was Harry who assigned meaning to the tape, and the vignette highlights his ability to use his unique imagination that enabled him to draw in other peers in his class. Harry had a central role throughout the evolving game. He was setting the rules and directing the others, with his peers seeking his help and approval while making the lightsabres.

While previous observations showed that Harry often enjoyed playing on his own, the above instance highlighted that Harry, like any other child, had preferences that varied and fluctuated depending on contextual factors. The vignette showed that Harry chose interactions with peers at times, alongside solitary play. In this case, a determining factor that sustained his involvement in this play was the lightsabres, an artefact from the popular Star Wars movies, which he thoroughly enjoyed. His interest in the Star Wars movies was evident from the beginning when I was introduced to his cat 'Yoda', named after a Star Wars character, during the home visit. By exerting his creativity and demonstrating knowledge of the pop culture elements (lightsabres) in this play, Harry adopted a central lead role in his peer group.

Figuring Things Out Together. At times, different toys and artefacts facilitated Harry's play with peer/s. In the below observation, Harry and [a child] are involved in negotiating the different aspects of an artefact (a hoola-hoop), and discovering ways in which it can be used:

I find Harry engaged in a lively conversation about 'Lightening McQueen' with a peer. [The child] moves to the green room and Harry follows him. [The child] picks up a hula-hoop and tries to spin it on his waist. Harry picks up another hoop and says, "Let me try it!" Harry gives it a try and then the two of them are showing each other how to spin it, taking turns. Harry seems very excited. He is laughing and jumping around. The other child begins

doing different flips with the hoop and Harry imitates him and tries to do the same:

Harry: What other tricks do you have up your sleeve?

(child shows another 'trick.')

Harry: Oooooh let me try that! (He is unable to do the 'trick' with the hoop). I don't know how to do it!

[Child]: Let me show you, watch Harry! (he demonstrates)

Harry: Oooh I wanna do that! (tries it a few times), hey watch my trick…do you want me to show you…

[Child]: That's not even a trick….!

The children continue engaging with the hoop, going back and forth, until the bell rings for morning tea. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 02.11.21)

As shown in the above extract, playing with peers also involved elements of 'figuring things out' together. As opposed to the evolving and imaginative nature of the play with the tape, here, Harry and [the child] engaged in an exploratory kind of play with everyday objects, creatively working out how the hoop could be used in different ways. These instances were reflective of opportunities where Harry explored, problem-solved, and negotiated working together with a peer in the context of play.

The children were involved in co-constructing the different elements of play, be it trying to perfect the conventional twirl with the hoop or trying out new 'tricks'. This involved active demonstration of the trick by one of them, which would be imitated by the other, and built on, to make a new trick or a new move with the hoop. By way of this back and forth dialogue and experimentation of how to use the hoop in new ways, Harry was engaged in a process of mutual learning through imitation and, trial and error.

"That's Not Fair!" Playing with peers inevitably involved encountering and navigating conflicts. In the below observation, the children in the class were all playing in different areas of the classroom, and three boys were making a 'hut' with some wooden planks and blankets. Harry was engaged in a pretend sword fight with another peer, however, he became interested in the 'hut' once it was completed and showed a desire to be a part of the play with the three boys. The following vignette shows Harry's awareness and perceptions of fairness in conflictual play situations with his peers:

Three boys are playing in the hut that they had made. Harry goes over to the hut and asks the others, "Can I be the brother?" I was intrigued and so I ask them what they are playing. One of the boys replies, "We are playing Power Rangers family." I understand that they are 'Power Rangers' characters and they are playing family with a house, mum, dad, brother etc. Harry asks if he can come inside the hut. The boys don't reply, and then one of them asks Harry to get more pillows. Harry goes and grabs more pillows, but he is still not allowed inside the hut. One of the boys inside the hut says, "There is no room Harry, you have to make your own hut!" Harry replies, "Why can't I come in?" Another child says, "Get out Harry, you have to sleep outside, there is no room." Harry moves away and sits a little aside with his knees drawn up to his chest. He appears angry. A girl who was observing this game has now made her way into the hut [unclear if this was by invitation]. Harry says to me, "That is not nice, that's not fair, they said I have to sleep outside, but she has gotten in...I am going to take my revenge by scaring them with my sword!" He then proceeds to creep around the hut and attempts to scare the others by yelling and pointing his sword. Eventually, his teacher Ms. Sara comes to see what the commotion is about. She listens to each of their explanations and then tells Harry that he will have to negotiate a time with the others [to use the hut], and he will have to wait for his turn. Harry has a disappointed expression on his face, but he agrees and then moves to his crafting table. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 08.12.21)

When he experienced unpleasant play situations, Harry's response was often 'getting back' at his peers or exacting 'revenge' on them as shown in the above vignette. However, such responses were mainly motivated by the fact that Harry perceived these instances to be unfair to him. Checking in with Harry after the above interaction, he articulated his awareness of what was considered fair, and also his emotions at that time, "It made me feel angry" (Harry, fieldnote entry, 08.12.21). Being fair in play was very important to him and he would take it upon himself to implement this, such as telling another child who was not sharing a toy that "it belongs to everyone!" (Harry, fieldnote entry, 02.11.21) since it is in the class. In the above instance, Harry was upset about not being let into the hut; but also, about the fact that another girl had been let in, which he considered unfair. Yet, after Ms Sara intervened, he understood the terms of the negotiation, that he will have to work out a time with the other boys to use the

hut, although this is not the outcome he was hoping for. For the other children in the class, these conflicts appeared to be frequent, albeit short lived. However, such conflicts were a source of ongoing tension for Harry as mentioned in an interview later that day. When asked what he would change about his classroom, he replied, “I would change all the naughty kids. I would change them into good people, and they will all be my friends. And they will help other people and they will listen” (Harry, interview, 08.12.21).

5.1.2 Dynamic Perceptions of Friendships

Harry spoke about his peers often, describing them as a friend or ‘not a friend’. His views on friendship were dynamic and included both critical and negative perceptions of friendships regarding himself and others, as well as favourable views of friendships. His perceptions about friendships were influenced by his views on the characteristics of a good friend. A good friend, according to Harry, is “a person who is being nice to you” (Harry, interview, 22.11.21). On many occasions, his perception of the same peer changed and these changing perceptions were shaped by his preferences for, and experiences of, play during that day, or a particular experience that he had with the peer.

The Rules of Friendship. Harry had rules about his interaction with a perceived friend or ‘not a friend’. If he viewed a peer as his friend, Harry would readily help and assist him or her in play or classwork. In the below observation, Harry was making a ‘Ben 10’ watch for himself when a peer joined him (Figure 7). Of note is Harry’s willingness to help the peer:

> *A boy, seeing Harry make his watch asks him how he did it and Harry demonstrates. The two are making the watch, sitting side by side. The boy noticed that one component of the watch was made with a plastic straw, so he asked Harry, “Hey, do you have some more straw that I can use?” Harry replies, “No, but I am getting some tomorrow and I can give them to you because you are my friend.” (Harry, fieldnote entry, 06.12.21)*

Figure 7

Ben 10 Watch Made by Harry

On the other hand, if Harry considered a peer not to be a friend, he would not engage with them, and as in play, his 'rules' here were dictated by his perception of fairness. If Harry considered a situation to be unfair to him or perceived a rebuff, he would view the child as 'not a friend'. He remained steadfast in his view of a friend as someone who is nice, and previous observations aligned with this:

> *The day started with a game of BINGO. Children are sitting in a square and the teacher, Ms. Sara, asks a boy to come and sit next to Harry. Harry immediately says, "I don't like him because he is not my friend."*
> *Ms. Sara: Oh, no.*
> *Harry: He's not my friend because he swapped me for [another child].*
> *Ms. Sara: Do you know that you can have more than one friend?*
> *Harry: Oh…okay. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 04.08.21)*

In many instances, he considered his rules or expectations about interacting with a person who is not *his* friend, to also extend to those who he perceived as his friend. For instance, Harry regarded me as his friend and he referred to me as such when introducing me to others, however:

> *In the afternoon, I was helping one of the boys tape up the side of a cardboard box when Harry came over and said, "You really shouldn't be helping him, he's not really my friend, he's not nice to me," and then walked away. I was near the end of taping it up anyway, so I moved on to the next*

child who was waiting in line for my help. When the first boy came back and asked for help with something else again, Harry once again came to me and repeated what he had said. I explained to him gently, "Harry, I am an adult, so I need to help children if they ask for my help." Harry seemed to understand this, and he replied "Yeah, I guess… you are right." (Harry, fieldnote entry, 03.11.21)

Harry's rules and sense of fairness were broad and flexible; it could change depending on the context. While he applied them based on his personal experiences, Harry also demonstrated an awareness of another person's point of view, in this case, my view as an adult who should assist children if needed and he did not hold rigidly to his stances. While in some cases the line distinguishing Harry's ideas of a friend and 'not a friend' was clear, in other instances, this line blurred, depending on the context and personal factors including his interests, emotions, and perceptions of fairness.

Making Decisions. Harry's perceptions of friendships also frequently oscillated between wanting friends and companionship, to wanting to be alone or not engage with a particular child. The following observation was made immediately before the children went outside for break time and shows Harry's desire to engage in friendship and play with other children in his class:

The bell rings for morning tea and the children rush outside. Harry is with a girl in the coat room and the two of them are imitating each other, making funny faces and gestures. I go over there and Harry says, "We are playing copycat! … and we are going to go outside and play it." The girl is putting on her shoes now and she says, "No I am going to go find my friends." Harry is silent for a few seconds and then brings his palms together, interlocking his fingers and with a smile says, "Can we please be friends…?" The girl says, "No, I have already got friends…" and then rushes off. Harry doesn't seem too bothered as he is still smiling and then spots another boy from a slightly older class outside and says to me, "I am going to go find him, he's my friend!" (Harry, fieldnote entry, 24.11.21)

Here, although Harry clearly demonstrated a desire for companionship, he does not appear to be disappointed in being rejected by the girl; he is quick to identify a boy from another class who is playing outside, as his friend. I observed him approach this boy and play with him together for a significant amount of time during the morning break. On the contrary, he was also firm in his views of who he *did not* want to play with:

> *Harry made the cut-out person and glued it on a stick (like a puppet). He decided to hang it up on the wall near his desk. His teacher-aide who was present, asks him, "Who are you going to ask to play with you?"*
> *Harry: Yeah ... not [names three children]. They are not my friends. They are mean.*
> *TA: Oh, so you could ask [a girl].*
> *(TA had previously asked this girl who was nearby if she wanted to play. She had nodded enthusiastically, but was nowhere to be found now.)*
> *Harry: Yeah….*
> *TA: What about [names another child]? You guys are friends, right?*
> *Harry: He's not here today and we are not really friends anymore. And I won't ask [the three children] because they are mean.*
> *Vani: Why do you say they are mean?*
> *Harry: Well [child] and I were friends, but he replaced me with [another child] …. I tried to be friends again…. we were friends until [another child] came along. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 27.09.21)*

In many instances, he preferred to play on his own, even when his teacher-aide suggested a play friend, insisting that, "I just like playing by myself, I don't really want to ask anyone" (Harry, fieldnote entry, 27.09.21). He showed decisiveness in choosing his companions, and a 'buddy' suggested by the teacher was not always preferred. Harry valued his agency when it came to deciding who to spend his time with and when, and he always conveyed his preference to his teachers or me, the researcher. Thus, Harry's perception of his past experiences and interactions with his peers influenced the deliberate choices he made in choosing his play companions, and his friends. Similarly, Harry also clearly articulated when he wanted to be alone as is shown below:

During lunch break, Harry decides to go back to the classroom and make an 'axe' [from Minecraft] and he gathers the materials for it. There was a girl already in class and just then, another girl and a boy came in as well. These three eventually sit at a table together and are engaged in colouring and chatting. Harry continues to sit on the mat and work on his axe. While the children were mostly engaged in colouring by themselves, occasionally they would come over and look at Harry to see what he was doing. Harry says to a boy, "I really want to be alone, can you just let me have some alone time?" The boy returns to his table with the others. Harry continues saying to no one in particular, "I just want some peace and quiet, no one gives me what I want!" I suggested he go to the green room (i.e., adjoining playroom) but he just said, "They will just follow me there." (Harry, fieldnote entry, 19.10.21)

Remembering (Negative) Experiences. Harry often conveyed strong sentiments regarding his peers, particularly in relation to unpleasant experiences. Harry had an ongoing conflict with one of the boys in his class. Harry often spoke of him as being "mean". I had only observed one such instance where this boy had acted in a way that was potentially hurtful to Harry. Harry had made a paper cut-out of a 'scary character' from a game and had shown it to the boy, making a loud sound with the paper cut-out held in front of him. The boy had looked at it and then knocked it out with his hand, almost ripping it. Harry contorted his face, came to me, and said, "I hate him, he is such a loser!!" (Harry, fieldnote entry, 29.09.21*).* About 6 weeks later, we did an art activity where Harry drew a picture of things he did not like at school. Harry specifically asked for a red sheet of paper, and then drew the "mean" boy, depicting him as a "demon" (Figure 8). As he completed his drawing, he spoke to me about the boy. In the below interview extract, Harry's sustained negative perceptions, about a peer with whom he had an unpleasant experience, is evident:

Harry: Feel like I want to make [the child] look like evil.
Vani: Oh, why is that?
Harry: Because he is always being mean to me.
Vani: What does he do?

Harry: He acts stupid, but he thinks it's good to act mean to someone and he always gets told off. He's always mean. He's not just mean with me…with other kids.

Vani: Can you tell me a bit more…. give me some examples?

Harry: He's like being silly around me and with my friends. Yep, he certainly doesn't like this school, I bet.

Vani: Why do you say that?

Harry: Because he's always mean at the school……. because it's gonna be after he hit me.

Vani: When did he hit you?

Harry: He never hit me. Pretending that he did.

Vani: Ok, oh he's pretending?

Harry: No, I am pretending that he did.

Vani: Why are you pretending that he did?

Harry: Because I don't …. because this drawing is about something …I am going to make the eyes red because that will make him more like he's a demon.

Vani: Goodness, a demon? I bet he isn't that bad.

Harry: He isn't that bad, just I am pretending. But he's real bad though, I feel like he is a demon.

Vani: Oh so you are pretending because you feel that way.

Harry: Yep. I feel in danger around him. He makes me feel in danger.

Vani: Why do you feel that? Tell me more.

Harry: Because I feel like he's a …just think he's a demon…and that could be where the blood is, and the horns are gonna be orange….

(Harry, interview, 22.11.21)

Figure 8

Drawing of a Peer (Artwork by Harry)

This was an acute expression of Harry's view of a peer that he did not get along well with. His teacher had mentioned to me that Harry and this boy had conflicts during the first term of school. These conflicts and negative experiences continued to affect Harry. His teacher said on a previous occasion:

> *He tends to hold on to things, for instance, a child from his pre-school, who had come to his class…Harry said, "I don't like him because he hit me," they would have been about 3 years old. You must have noticed that Harry verbalises his feelings about people, like in the morning….he's got a great memory and he tends to pick up on small looks and actions from people and may immediately conclude that they don't like him or is bullying him. (Harry's teacher, fieldnote entry, 04.08.21)*

It was also possible, but not common, for a peer he disliked to be considered a friend in another situation and vice-versa. Surprisingly, on one occasion, the boy he had portrayed as a 'demon' became a companion of choice. On this day, Harry had brought a Minecraft 'sticker book' to class:

> *Once literacy on the mat was done, Ms. Sara said that Harry could get his sticker book now and she also suggested, "Why don't you choose someone,*

a buddy, who can do it with you?" Harry hesitated. His teacher prompted again, "You could show a friend your sticker book and you could do it together." Harry replied, "Yeah, ok, well I will tell them what to do and they can help with my sticker book." Harry looked around and then asked a boy whom he had previously drawn as evil and said was mean. The boy puts his hand around Harry's shoulder and the two of them choose a spot in the classroom to go over the sticker book. I am surprised! (Harry, fieldnote entry, 08.12.21)

The interaction between Harry and the boy carried on for approximately five minutes before the boy went over to play with another group. I noticed that Harry's interest and passion for Minecraft acted as a facilitator and his eagerness to share his proud possession overrode his negative perception of his peer. His teacher also suggested that it may be because the boy was loud, played with a lot of the other children, and was considered 'popular'. It could also be because Harry saw this boy first whilst looking for a companion to share his Minecraft sticker book with. Nevertheless, Harry's perceptions of his peers and friends fluctuated depending on such contextual factors.

5.1.3 Socialising Through Different Identities and Roles

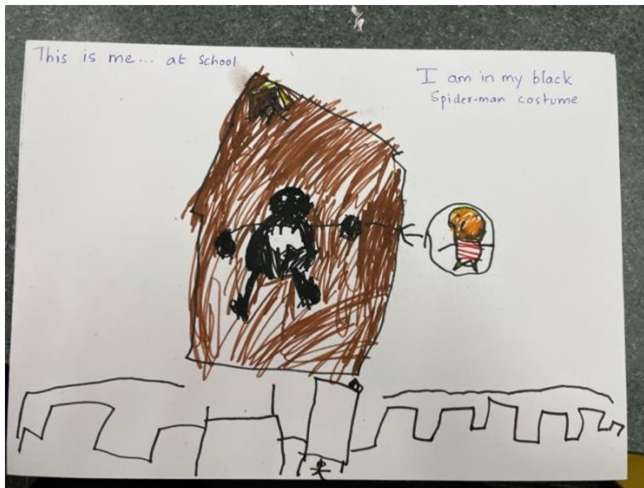
A key aspect of play and socialising with peers for Harry involved adopting different roles and identities. This ranged from fictional characters to real-world scenarios of leadership and management, and these identities frequently overlapped, often influencing and informing the other. Harry's creativity and passion for craft shone through these instances of play where he would assume, and express himself through, the identity of a beloved character from a movie or a game that he enjoyed, by meticulously creating costumes and implementing storylines revolving around the character. Harry's costumes were a source of pride for him, and fascination for his peers. One day I asked Harry, who was wearing a Spider-Man costume he had made, why he chose to wear it to school. He replied,"Because I wanted to bring it back to show it to other people…everyone in class and they will go Whoooooooooaaah." (Harry, fieldnote entry, 09.11.21).

"I am Spiderman!" For Harry, the characters of Minecraft or Marvel movies were a part of formulating his own identity—at times, while wearing the costume, he ceased to be

Harry and took on the name and identity of the character. During an initial research activity session, Harry drew an artwork that depicted himself at school. In the artwork, he drew himself as Spiderman and requested that I write on top 'I am in my black Spiderman costume' (Figure 9):

Figure 9

Harry as Spiderman at School (Artwork by Harry)



He explained that he was Spiderman and was in the classroom depicted by the brown box, surrounded by the schoolyard and fence. However, he also points out that he is *inside* the costume, indicating to the arrow and the smaller drawing of himself next to the one wearing the costume. It was important to him that others know, "that I [Harry] am wearing the costume" (Harry, interview, 09.11.21).

On other days, Harry took on the identity of a character completely, and would only respond when addressed to by the character's name. These observations showed Harry's deep engagement with the adopted 'identity'. For instance:

> *Harry was in a Spiderman costume this morning and as he saw me through the window, he smiled and started coming over. I went to him and said, "Good morning Harry, nice costume." He responded, "I am not Harry, I am Spidey…Harry is not here, he is not well so he sent me in his place." (Harry, fieldnote entry, 09.11.21)*

Harry would also create elaborate storylines and games associated with each character. Harry mainly engaged in solitary play as the character role he had adopted. He also interacted with me as the character, as was illustrated in his role as 'Dream' mentioned in Chapter 4 (see section 4.1.4). Sometimes, he remained in the role throughout the school day, often receiving a lot of enquiries from curious children along the way, who would sometimes join in with Harry's game. For Harry, who was absorbed in the identity of the character, the games were very real. For example, in the vignette below, Harry 'becomes' Spiderman, and is fighting off 'Carnage' a villain from the Marvel movies, with a 'fire sword':

> *Harry came to ask me where Carnage was, and I said I was not sure. He then asked another boy who was nearby, "Hey, do you know where Carnage is?" The boy looked around. I said, "I think it is behind [the boy]." The boy quickly looked over his shoulder, made a sweeping jump and rolled on the floor and said, "I got out just in time." Harry went to where [the boy] was standing and 'fought' Carnage and said, "I saved your life, I protected you." [The boy] says, "What a cool game Harry!" Harry replies "It's not a game, Carnage is real!" The child goes back to playing what he was playing before and Harry goes back to fighting Carnage on his own. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 22.09.21)*

Being a Teacher. As part of his different pop culture identities, Harry also made props to go with his costume such as the 'fire sword' mentioned above. His creations were usually very detailed and intricate, grabbing the interest of several of his peers, who attempted to replicate what he made. In such instances, Harry took on a teacher role where he was involved in guiding others to make the costumes and props, as is shown in the below vignette:

> *Today, Harry is a character from Minecraft, and he is making an 'armour' for his body by rolling up big sheets of paper and wrapping them around his arms and legs. A few boys notice what Harry is doing and begin making their own armour. They ask him, "How are you making the arm Harry?" and Harry demonstrates with a roll of paper, helping the boys 'put it on'. Soon, many of the children begin doing the same, so much so that more than half the class is now making an 'armour' with Harry assisting in the process and teaching the other children the steps to make it. Following Harry's lead, I*

helped the children with cutting and taping the ends of the paper rolls together. Ms Sara comments, "Whatever you are doing Harry, seems to be popular and catching on!" (Harry, fieldnote entry, 03.11.21)

Harry demonstrated creative skills when making artefacts, and these were often sought out by his peers, especially when they were generated as part of his ongoing pop culture identity he had adopted for that time. These pop culture personas and artefacts appeared intriguing for the children as it was something that diverged from their day-to-day play and games. Given that these items of pop culture were present in media frequently, the children would have likely encountered these outside of the school context. Thus, they recognised and related to the artefacts that Harry made. When children approached Harry for help, he usually provided both guidance and additional interesting facts or information about the movie or the cartoon, which often resulted in lively conversations between the peer and Harry. However, for Harry, these identities were an expression of his interests at that point in time, and so they changed frequently. Very often, Harry was observed deeply engaged in his own 'bubble of play' as the character he chose to be that day. During these times, Harry did not actively seek out other peers, but ironically the children were attracted to join Harry during these times of solitary play. Harry almost always readily welcomed the other children into his game, the storyline of which was usually extended to accommodate the newcomers.

While Harry had taken on a very central role in the above example, in some instances, his creativity and artistic skills were overlooked by his peers. The below vignette shows that, although Harry was initially overlooked by a peer, he still forged a connection through his creative skills:

I am sitting at the table with Harry, his teacher-aide, and another boy from the class. The boy asked me if I could draw him an outline of a 'remote controller'. Harry immediately said, "I know how to draw one, I can draw it for you." This was ignored by the boy, who then asked the teacher-aide. Neither I nor the teacher-aide could understand the specification of the remote controller drawing that the boy wanted, however, Harry seemed to grasp this quickly and he again volunteered to draw it for him. After a few more attempts by the boy to explain what he wanted, Harry said that he could draw it for the third time. The boy tells Harry [gently], "I didn't mean you!"

They go back to drawing for a few minutes until the boy brings up drawing the remote controller again. This time his teacher-aide says, "Why not let Harry give it a go?" The boy hesitantly handed over a sheet of paper to Harry who started drawing. When he is finished, the boy takes the paper from him and I can see that he is pleased with what Harry has done. The boy starts to colour the outline and after a few minutes he wants a bigger outline; this time he asks Harry, "Can you draw one that is a bit bigger?" Harry readily agrees and draws a remote controller while explaining how he is doing it. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 16.08.21)

Thus, while Harry takes on a 'teacher' role in many instances of play, at times, this role is negotiated by his teacher-aide or his teacher. Typically, however, Harry's role as a teacher stemmed spontaneously from his embodiment of different character identities that he used to negotiate his interactions with his peers; such instances were examples of one identity or role (Minecraft character) informing and giving rise to the other (teacher).

Being a Leader. In addition to guiding and supporting other children in making artefacts during play, another way in which Harry engaged with his peers was by 'taking the lead'. In some instances, Harry took charge of play involving himself and one or two other peers. In other cases, his role as a leader was interwoven with that of a teacher, the boundaries between the two often shifting and merging. Harry's leadership role was visible when engaging with just one or two peers, and also in the context of groups. The below vignette shows Harry's engagement with a peer through assuming a 'leader' role:

Harry has come back into the class followed by another boy I have never seen before. Harry says to me, "He's my best friend." He then turns to the boy and says, "You are my best friend. I love my mom the most, more than you, but you are my best friend and I have lots of friends!" I observed that Harry was doing most of the talking between the two of them. He then tells the boy firmly, "Come to the library with me." The boy follows but then goes into another class. Harry repeats "follow me" a couple of times. The boys move into another room and I hear Harry speaking in a raised and agitated tone. I head over to the room and Harry explains that the boy did not have his water bottle with him and then comments, with wide hand gestures, "But

I can't understand why he can't just go to the water fountain!" Harry says to the boy, "C'mon, we can go to the water fountain to get some water." And then—"I am going to leave you behind." The boy then follows and the two of them make their way out. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 02.11.21)

The child described in the above example belonged to another class and was someone I had not seen Harry interact with before. Nevertheless, on this day, Harry chose to spend his break time with this child, referring to him as his best friend. Harry attempted to take on the role of a leader here, assertively instructing the boy to follow him to the library and directing the course of how they would spend their lunchtime. The children continued in this manner for some time, with Harry giving out instructions for play, however, not all of Harry's instructions were met with compliance. Harry and his friend negotiated certain aspects of the play however initiatives about where to go and what to do, and final decisions were made by Harry.

As opposed to taking charge with a peer or two, Harry's role as a leader within a group setting was also evident when he was teaching and guiding his peers on how to make certain artefacts, highlighting the interconnectedness of these roles that Harry assumed. In these situations, Harry emerged as a leader within the group that looked to him for guidance and approval. Any subsequent play, that involved the props and artefacts that the children created following Harry's lead, was typically directed by Harry, who set out the rules of the games that involved those specific artefacts. Thus, Harry's roles were not mutually exclusive and did not exist in isolation. Harry's identities interacted with the social world within his classroom and this in turn influenced and informed the other roles, in an evolving manner.

5.1.4 Making Connections

Conversations around interests and goals provided opportunities for Harry to relate and connect with his peers. Although at times brief, the conversations were meaningful to the children as they involved a common hobby or interest. These conversations, which adults were usually not privy to, mostly revolved around pop culture interests or involved planning for future activities together.

Connecting Through Interesting Conversation. During observations, many instances of interaction between Harry and his friends involved conversations that were

seemingly unusual, yet were enthusiastically sustained between the children. While initially, these conversations were unfathomable to me, sustained observations and interactions with the children, followed by asking them questions eventually built up a picture of the broad topics of their conversations. In the example below, Harry was talking to and connecting with a peer about characters from Minecraft. In this instance, the topic of their conversation was evident as they were looking over a Minecraft book. The conversation between the children show how there was a shared understanding, and how they picked up on each other cues, without needing further elaborations:

> *One of the boys picked up a book about Minecraft. Harry on the other side of the room, saw the book and came over to look at the book with the other boy. The ensuing conversation about Minecraft was confusing for me, however, the boys were deeply engaged in it, going back and forth and discussing the different characters in the game:*
> *Harry (looking at the book): Hey guess what!! That is actually a creeper…*
> *[Child]: WHAT!!! (loudly, with eyes wide and mouth open, looking at Harry and then at the book.)*
> *Harry: Yeah did you know that creepers were actually….*
> *[Child]: I sneak in and pick lava inside.*
> *Harry: You can ignite it with the fire aspect...*
> *[Child] Oh my gosh, hahaha there's a zombie. Do you think zombies are idiots?*
> *Harry: Zombies aren't real. (Points at something) Hairy O'Brian haha.*
> *[Child]: Pigs are idiots.*
> *Harry: I think they are….the skeletons are actually ancient builders that came before us. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 03.11.21)*

Harry connected with his peer in the above example through a spontaneous conversation about a shared interest, Minecraft. While such dialogues between the children may appear unfamiliar to another listener, through and within these conversations, Harry built a sense of relatedness with his peers. Although these instances were brief, in many cases they led to other interactions later. For example, later in the day, the same boy sought Harry out to share something new he had learnt about Minecraft.

Connecting Through Making Plans. Another way in which Harry related to his peers was through conversations that involved planning, usually for future play. At times, Harry was observed planning a particular game or a strategy for a game with his peers, mostly to be carried out during the next breaktime or in some cases, outside of the school context. In the conversations below between Harry and a peer, the children are referring to the national lockdown levels that were implemented in New Zealand during the global Covid-19 pandemic:

> *Harry and [a child] are sitting at a table having their afternoon snack. I ask if I can join them at the table, and the children nod their heads and make space for me.*
> *Harry: But I can't come over to your house now, because of lockdown.*
> *[Child]: Oh! No, you can actually because it is level 2. You can't go to another person's house under level 4, but in level 2 we are allowed.*
> *Harry: I can come over then!*
> *Vani: So, you both have been to each other's houses? What did you do then?*
> *[Child]: Well Harry has come over to my place. We did drawing, played on the tramp…*
> *Harry: I have got a tramp too, but it has got [incomprehensible]on it and I have made a slide and we have it in the backyard.*
> *[Child]: I want to go to Harry's house because it sounds like a lot of fun.*
> *Vani: Awesome, what do you think you guys are going to do the next time?*
> *[Child]: Well we are not sure, because we haven't set up a playdate yet!*
> *Harry: But we are already friends!*
> *[Child]: Yeah…*
> *Vani: Oh, so what's the best part about being friends?*
> *[Child]: It's a lot of fun!*
> *Vani: So, you think it's important to have friends? What do you think Harry?*
> *Harry: Yeah…so that we can play together! And we can play with my Pokéballs…*
> *[Child]: Yeah because it's fun to have friends, otherwise you don't know what to do and you don't have anyone to play with.*
> *Harry: Hey maybe I can come over today!*
> *[Child]: Oh, [names another child] is coming over today afternoon.*

Harry: They can all come, and I can bring my pokéballs and we can team up!
[Child]: Yeah, my brother will be there too, so you can team up with [names child], or I can team up with [names brother]. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 21.09.21)

In the above example, Harry refers to the boy as his friend and he appears keen to visit the boy's house. The children were involved in making teams and planning a game with 'pokéballs', an artefact from the Pokémon cartoons. Harry's view of the boy as his friend is interwoven here with his eagerness to "play together…. with my pokéballs". Harry's mother had mentioned that he had previously been to the boy's home to play outside of school time. Although here, Harry described this boy as a friend, he was not observed interacting with him any longer than with other peers during research observations. Nevertheless, Harry and the boy's shared interest in Pokémon and their conversations that involved mutual planning for a future play provided the scaffolding on which Harry connected with the boy in this context.

Connecting Through Giving and Receiving Support. Harry also related with his peers through conversations that were mutually helpful for the children involved. These instances were typically facilitated by a teacher but also occurred organically during play. In the below example, Harry asks a peer for help, prompted by his teacher:

For the activity, the children were making a frog cut-out with a tongue that sticks out. The children formed groups of 3–4 and clustered about with colours, chatting and doing the activity. Harry, on the other hand, chose to sit by himself to do the activity, although surrounded by children in groups. I moved between the groups and also sat with Harry, joining in on the colouring but following his instructions and lead ("colour green in here"). Harry was struggling to stick the long tongue on the frog as he did not understand the instructions and so he went to the teacher. Another boy had done it already and the teacher asked Harry to ask the boy for help. Harry went over and with the teacher's prompts asked, "Could you please help me with the frog?" The boy agreed and gave instructions to Harry and the two of them did the sticking together. Harry responded with, "Hey it worked….can we colour it in now, you can do that bit…and then I can help

you with yours." Once the boys had finished with Harry's frog cut-out, they started on the boy's cut-out. (Harry, fieldnote entry, 01.12.21)

Although initially, Harry chose to complete the frog activity on his own, he sought out help from the teacher when he encountered some difficulty in completing the task. Aided by his teacher, Harry asked for help from a peer and on receiving it, offered to help the peer in return. Sometimes, such interactions also involved elements of negotiations, particularly if they occurred in the context of play. By asking and receiving help, and offering to help others, Harry at times, shifted from his solitary engagement in an activity to interacting with others. However, such reciprocity in interactions was transitory and Harry usually returned to engaging in an activity on his own, yet, they provided important opportunities for Harry to relate with his peers. Although typically short-lived, as with the case of engaging in conversation over shared interests, such reciprocal interaction giving and receiving support also extended to other parts of the day. Having an awareness of *who* to ask for help with something, meant that Harry would seek out the peer for help with other aspects of schoolwork or play, and vice-versa. In this way, not only were the instances of interaction reciprocal in nature but sometimes, the *relationship* with the peer would in itself take on a quid pro quo characteristic.

5.2 James' Social Experiences

In this section, James' social experiences with his peers in his school are highlighted in the context of the social dynamics within his classroom presented in Chapter 3. Five themes accompanied with illustrative vignettes are presented: (i) the many facets of friendships, (ii) collaboration and ownership in play, (iii) spaces of imagination and play (iv) emotional insights, and (v) everyday interactions within the classrooms.

5.2.1 The Many Facets of Friendships

It was very important for James to have friends in order to feel included in his peers' activities. While he spoke often about his friends, he also worried about being left out or having no one to play with. James identified three boys from another class as his closest friends during an interview and I frequently observed him with this group. However, he often reported feeling lonely, and this was usually brought about when the boys started playing a game without

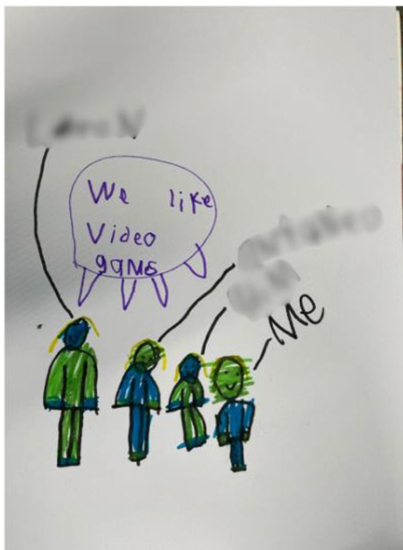
waiting for him. This occurred a few times, primarily because the boys were from another class and would sometimes be let off for breaks earlier. His mother had mentioned that:

> *He doesn't understand the concept of friendship really, he just thinks that friendship is about someone playing with him and when they don't play with him the next day, he thinks that they are not his friends anymore. I am trying to teach him the fact that just because someone may not be able to spend their time with him at certain times, that doesn't mean they are not his friends, rather friends are people who care about you… he struggles with friendships really. (James' mother, personal communication, 20.07.21)*

However, in my observations, there were times when James demonstrated a competent understanding of friendships as elucidated in the following paragraphs. He also drew a picture of him and his friends (Figure 10):

Figure 10

James and his Friends (Artwork by James)



"My Friends Know I am Autism." James' friends were aware that he was autistic and one friend in particular, made efforts to ensure that James was happy and comfortable whenever they were together. James was very appreciative of this boy and referred to him as his best friend. The following interview extract shows how James was insightful of the efforts made by his friends to support him:

Vani: I have seen you play with some friends. Can you tell me a little bit about them?
James: They are not bullies! So my friends know that I am autism so they let me play with them and don't fight in front of me.
Vani: So, they play with you and are nice to you.
James: Uhmm ahhh (nods in agreement).[Child] is the boss of all of us, but I don't care if he is the boss because he is the kindest, he lets me be what I can be and in armies he lets me be a bomb machine.
Vani: A bomb machine? Oh…So you said he is the boss, but he is the kindest….
James: Yeah, he is the kindest boss and the second boss is [another child], the meanest boss.
Vani: Why do you say he is the meanest?
James: He is another friend but he is a bit meaner. He says, "You always whine about stuff," and I say, "Because I just get sad sometimes." But he asks about different things…. "Why do you get to be a bomb machine and I don't? I made it up…"
Vani: So why did you say the other friend was the kindest?
James: Because he knows that I am autism and he asks everyone to be nice and calm because I get sad.
Vani: So, he tells other people to be calm?
James: No, he tells my friends to be calm.
Vani: So that you don't feel sad?
James: uhmmm hmmm… (James, interview, 08.11.21)

In the above extract, James was referring to a game called 'armies' that the children play, with the 'bomb machine' being a coveted position in the game. Although one of his friends is referred to as the "boss", James clarified that he is the "kindest". The kindest friend was one of three boys James had referred to as his closest friends and here he is described as someone who understands the emotions and difficulties that James faced, who stands up to the "meanest" friend and supports him during playtime. On many other occasions, James spoke fondly of this child, sometimes referring to him as his best friend. He would also wait outside this child's class when the bell rang for lunch breaks. Importantly, James also tried to explain to his peers that he feels sad at times. His best friend understood this explanation as shown

above, but one of his peers did not. James' best friend, through his understanding of autism and specifically the challenges faced by James, played a central role in helping him navigate the terrain of the social world of the school. James' perception of his friends as considerate and understanding appeared to contribute to his sense of inclusion within the group.

"Some People Don't Like Autism Ways." James' best friend understood the struggles that James went through and was instrumental in him feeling included and supported during play with his peers. The children's general awareness that James is autistic (or in James' words, 'is autism') did not automatically result in his other friends being more supportive. Two children in particular illustrate this point. One child is categorised by James as a friend, albeit the meanest. As they play in the same group, conflicts with this child are frequent, despite another child's effort to include James:

> *When James came back to the classroom, he immediately said to me, "My friends aren't letting me play with them because they said I am always crying, but I stopped crying and they were still annoyed with me. Except for [child], my best friend!" I asked him, "Why is he your best friend?" He said, "Because he knows I have autism and he makes me have a good day when I am with him." (James, fieldnote entry, 18.10.21)*

In the above instance, James returned to the classroom during break time earlier than usual and told me that his friends did not want him to play with them anymore. This was a recurring theme in James' interactions with his friends. On another day, during an interview session, he mentioned that at times, one of his friends does not include him in their play. I asked him why, and his reason appeared to be connected to his friend's lack of understanding him:

> *He always calls me whiny… "You are always whining" [imitating the child]. And I am like, "Because I am different." And he's like, "No you are not, I am the only different one!" (James, interview, 29.11.21)*

James is very perceptive of the fact that some of his peers view him differently. He recognises that through his autism he appears 'different' to them, while also understanding that his peers sometimes preferred like-minded friends. Consistent with his mother's observations

about the ‘loneliness cycle’ reported in Chapter 3, this awareness sometimes prevents James from seeking out others to play with, because he believes that he will be rejected on account of being different as is illustrated in the following example:

> *James: The playgrounds do not have swings or trampoline, so sometimes I just play on the slides and if no one plays with me, then I just play bust by myself, busting by myself until somebody plays with me.*
> *Vani: Do you ask other people to play with you?*
> *James: Yeah, but sometimes they say no. I don’t like…asking people sometimes.*
> *Vani: Why?*
> *James: Because some people don’t like autism ways, they want to be different. They want to be like their… themselves. (James, interview, 08.11.21)*

“Friends are Supposed to Agree.” Over the course of observations, it became evident that James’ group of friends, which includes his ‘kindest’ best friend and the ‘meanest’ friend, had a form of hierarchical structure. Very often decisions on games to play and who would be included were made by either of the two boys, that is, the ones described by James as the kindest and the meanest. This observation was confirmed when James elaborated on the dynamics within his group as shown in the below extract. The following extract highlights that while James’ overarching view of a friend as the kindest or meanest remained unwavering throughout observations, his relationship with them was complex and contextual, with the vagaries of friendship evident in their interactions and play:

> *James: [Child who is referred to as the kindest] is the boss of me. I have to do what he says, otherwise we wouldn’t be friends anymore.*
> *Vani: Oh... I thought friends were supposed to listen to each other.*
> *James: No, friends are supposed to agree!*
> *Vani: Agree with each other, right?*
> *James: No, agree to one person!*
> *Vani: Oh, you mean, like one of them is the leader…*
> *James: Yeah… (James, fieldnote entry, 01.11.21)*

While James was aware that his best friend made efforts to include him and be kind to him, he viewed this friendship as being compliant to the 'boss' (the same friend) of the group. James also expressed his fear that if he did not agree with his friend, their friendship might not last. His differing perceptions about the same friend illuminated the tenuous nature of friendship for James.

5.2.2 Collaboration and Ownership in Play

James typically played with the group of boys from the class next door, but at times also engaged in play with peers from his own class. Many of the games and play scenarios were a joint endeavour. The play was mostly initiated by one of his peers, but James and other children in the class would sometimes join in, and the game would evolve through a process of mutual discussion and brainstorming, interspersed with arguments and conflicts. Many times, the development of play scenarios would involve disputes on ownership of artefacts made for the play and at times, ownership of ideas. Although temporary, instances of collaborative play cemented James' position within his peer group. This theme illustrates this sense of collaboration and ownership that was an integral part of play for James and his peers.

Being a Team Player. On the far end of the school playground, there was a sand pit, which was frequented by James and his friends. One day, James' class went swimming at the school pool located near the sandpit. The class finished early and the additional time provided an opportunity for some of the children to take advantage of the sandpit nearby. In this impromptu instance of play, James and his peers began building a 'city' in the sand. This vignette demonstrates James involvement as a 'team player' in play with his peers, where he negotiated and collaborated with the other children:

> *James and a group of about five peers immediately went to the sandpit and began building a 'sand city'. James and two others began planning and building the city by heaping up piles of sand and making landmarks. He would make a suggestion ("We should build an arcade!"), have disagreements ("You can't have the house there"), and incorporate suggestions from his peer ("James, maybe make it higher!"). This was all happening enthusiastically, without a preconceived plan, with more than one idea being implemented at once. James built a place for a 'date' and a three-*

storied house which he claimed was going to be his own house. The 'date place' was for a peer ("This is where you meet your date and we should also have a ceremony for your wedding!") Together, the children built roads connecting another city (being built nearby by 3 other peers) to this one (being built by James and two others). The children finally decided to call the city 'pickles'. (James, fieldnote entry, 29.11.21)

This instance of play was not with James' regular group of friends but with his classmates, with whom he rarely played. However, the sand pit was a favourite spot for James and his friends, as James mentions in an interview:

Yeah, we hang out everywhere. But the most complete place that we could stay is the sand pit next to the far park playground. That's where we get to hang out a lot. We get to build houses…we do dinos and smash them…yeah…we usually hang out by the far park sandpit…so that's the mostly place where we hang out… (James, interview, 29.11.21)

In this familiar location, James appeared comfortable and highly engaged with his classmates in the construction of the sand city. This was one of the very few instances where James was observed engaging with his classmates in play. Yet, in a later interview, James clarified that the children from his class with whom he was building the sand city were not his friends. Despite the peers not being his friends, caught up in the excitement of building a sand city, James was involved in negotiating and 'working out' a plan for the city. James' ideas to build a 'place for a date' and for the 'wedding ceremony' were negotiated with his peers and his ideas were extended and implemented. There was no one leader in this context; every child was more or less equally involved in coming up with ideas and implementing them. Often for classroom activities, Harry's peers were hesitant to include him voluntarily within the activity group. However, here in the context of play outside of the classroom, James and his peers collaborated and worked in tandem to build the city. This instance of play in a familiar setting and the process of collaboration provided James the opportunity to establish himself as a member of the peer group, with whom he seldom interacted. Importantly, this vignette showed how sharing a common goal (i.e., building a sand city) provided the context for positive peer interactions.

“This is Our Spaceship.” A sense of joint ownership over toys, artefacts, and ideas was another factor that contributed to James being included in the peer group within his class. In this vignette the key highlight is how James seamlessly included other interested children in his game and how they jointly incorporated different elements to his ‘spaceship’ to make it their own:

> *When I arrived, I did not find James anywhere in the class. His teacher pointed to the resource room and said he was in his ‘box-house’ and I spotted him inside a big cardboard box. I asked him about the box-house, and he said it was his space that he could play in and he also had a ‘blanket’ [a sheet of paper] in there. He asked me if I could be an alien as his box was a ‘spaceship’ and I agreed. His teacher suggested that he make a ‘do not touch’ sign for his spaceship. James and I drew ‘ghosts’ and ‘gravestones’ to make the sign scary and I then helped him tape it up on the box. Later in the day, after he had finished his classwork, he was allowed to go into the spaceship. A few other children were curious about this box and enquired about it. Two of them decided that they wanted to play in the spaceship with James, who readily invited them in. All three were now involved in making a door, a fireplace, and a TV for the spaceship. I was sitting nearby and helped out a little, but mostly, I was observing. They were involved in this for a few minutes and then they invited me to play with them. I agreed and I am given the role of an ‘alien snowman’ who is out to eat them. I sneak my hand through different openings in the box, and they pretend to scream and run away. There is a lot of laughter and giggling. After a while, the play subsides, and the group comes out of the spaceship. One of the girls takes a sheet of paper and makes a sign that says, “Me and James are in the fort together; this is our spaceship; we are in space” and puts it up on the box house. The ‘do not touch’ sign lies forgotten nearby. (James, fieldnote entry, 15.09.21)*

As shown in this sequence, the spaceship started as something that was initiated and made by James. However, James welcomed his peers in his spaceship and together they added more elements to it (e.g., fireplace, TV), which shifted the sense of individual ownership by James to one of joint ownership with two of his peers. This shift to more collaborative play did not perturb James, rather he embraced it and in doing so, the three of them became a unit for

the day. Such a sense of collaboration in play was not restricted to play artefacts but also extended to ideas and discoveries. The following extract shows that credit for 'ideas' was also jointly shared:

> *The children, having finished their classwork, were allowed to use the iPad. There was some music coming from an iPad being used by a boy sitting next to James. James seemed to recognise the music as belonging to an online game. He went over to the boy and asked "Are we allowed to play that?" The boy replied that their teacher had said they could and so James picked up his iPad and began playing it as well. In a few minutes, another boy came over and looked at what the first boy and James were playing. He then announced to the class, "Everyone's playing it because James and I discovered it!" A girl nearby said, "No, James and I discovered it." The children ask James to resolve this, and the girl asks, "Who came up with the idea with you [James]?" James is absorbed in the game and nonchalantly says "I did." (James, fieldnote entry, 30.11.21)*

In this instance, James is indisputably one of the two who made the 'discovery' of the game. Given the popularity of the game, the other two peers were eager to be included in James' 'idea' to find the game. Although the issue of who discovered the game with James was questioned, the sense of joint ownership of discovery, as well as jointly creating something (i.e., the spaceship), created a sense of companionship between James and his peers. This companionship was usually temporary, and James would typically go back to being on the periphery of social groups.

5.2.3 Spaces of Imagination and Play

The next two examples draw on James' description of, and interaction with, the places and spaces as sites of imagination that facilitated his play and interactions, with his friends and peers. The utilisation of space in a transformative way was not limited to the sand pit as was shown in the above vignette; it was evident in many aspects of play among the children.

Creating New Possibilities. The class was having their group and individual photographs taken that week by the school photographer, and the adjoining resource room had

been converted into a makeshift studio with a large expanse of green cloth covering one wall. This room was renamed the ‘green screen room’. The room was closed off during regular classwork time. In the below instance, the children had some spare time and the green screen room was open. The below vignette is illustrative of James and his peers’ creative utilisation of ordinary spaces in the classrooms and school:

> *In the backroom, a green screen had been set up and a few children were in the room. James went in and joined them. They were mostly children I didn’t recognise from the other classes. The room is filled with excited children, with the children talking all at once, but I understand from James’ conversation that they were “making a movie.” The children pull up a few chairs in front of the green screen. James says to me, “Come and sit on the chair and watch our show!” I make my way to the front and sit in one of the chairs. James explains, “We are doing Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,” then to another boy, “Can I be Charlie?” The boy agrees. The children are in front of the green screen acting out scenes from the movie. James says loudly, “I would like some chocolate,” while the boy says, “You have found the golden ticket!” Yet another is pretending to be Willy Wonka and the children are recreating the movie Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. There are a lot of happy loud voices speaking over each other, and James is engaged with the show, grinning broadly, and pretending to be Charlie, while also yelling out lines and making suggestions on the scenes. At one point, James goes to the other room, brings in a box and says, “We have got more costumes!” The children pick at a few items, like wigs, and continue with their playing until the rest of the class returns. (James, fieldnote entry, 07.12.21)*

In the above extract, James and his peers utilise the space around them to create a world of play that is transient but unique. The green screen set up for school photographs was a novel situation. The novel context is reimagined as the backdrop of a movie or a play with a space created in front, for an audience to be seated. James collaborates with his peers to ‘direct’ the movie, exerting agency and contributing to the collective ideas about the set-up and the costumes. Although the children around him were not those he explicitly identified as his

friends, James was embedded in the shared sense of creativity and imagination that was applied to transform the green screen room into a space that contributed to the children's play.

Shared Imaginations. The school had a large playground and at one end of the playground, in an area closed off by some trees and bushes on one side and a wall on the other was the 'peaceful garden'. This small area had a few garden flowers, trees, a bench and a small bridge. The peaceful garden was usually quiet as opposed to the general hustle and bustle of the playground and would sometimes be occupied by groups of children who would come and go. This was a favourite location for James and his friends as mentioned in one of the interviews. One day, I was invited to join them during break time at the peaceful garden. Of note in this vignette is the children's utilisation of permanent spaces in school that were set up for a specific purpose (i.e., the peaceful garden was set up as a place for quiet relaxation), but was used by the children in versatile ways:

> *I made my way over to the peaceful garden and saw a group of children huddled by the wall, James amongst them. They were talking about assigning characters and roles for a game they planned to play. They disbanded when they saw me and explained that they were pretending to be in a TV show. They asked me if I would like to join them and gave me a character name. The children were engaged in pretend play with the characters and roles evolving as the storyline changed. There is a raised platform at one end of the garden which became the 'house', with the steps leading to the platform marked as the entrance. The bench is located at one end of the platform under a tree. I was a 'background character' [as told to me by the children], sitting by the bench under the tree with a cup of tea. The children around me were preparing for the arrival of an important guest and James was setting up cookies. A child comes up to him, picks one up and says, "That's not a nice cookie!" This is followed by some discussion to replace the cookies to ensure that they are nice. A child approaches the steps and says loudly, "Hello! Knock knock!" Suddenly the children on the platform, which represents the inside of the house, erupted in a flurry of activity and James yelled, "He's here, He's here!" I continued to sit under the tree drinking my 'tea' and soon James joined me as another 'background character' and we pretended to drink tea and chat. (James, fieldnote entry, 01.11.21)*

James and his friends converted the peaceful garden into a house with a yard in the front in the above example. Similar to the novel 'green screen' room, the children utilised another space creatively to aid in their play. The green screen room was a provisional set-up, but the peaceful garden was a permanent one that was re-imagined frequently as a house, a shopping mall, a battleground for the army, and even as an arcade centre. In this way, spaces that were outside the boundaries of the typical or traditional play areas such as the playground and the sand pit, were pivotal to act as catalysts for play and friendships. They were transformed by James' and his friends to explore their inventiveness in play and interactions.

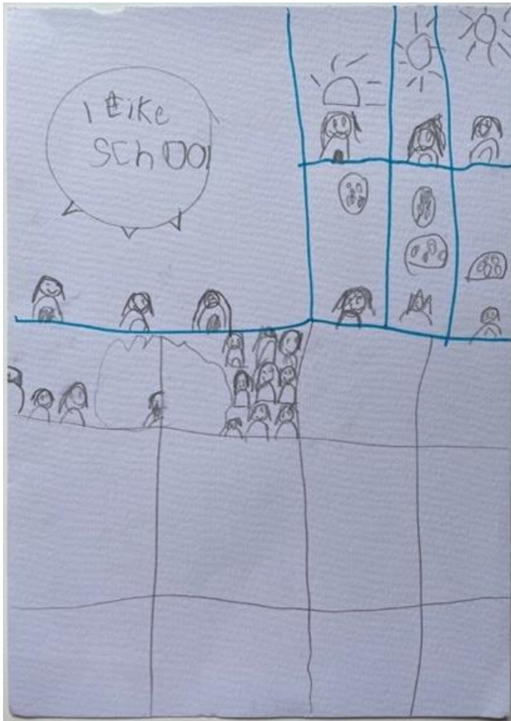
5.2.4 Emotional Insights

Previously, James' understanding of being viewed as 'different' was highlighted as hindering his motivation to seek out play companions (see section 5.2.1). James' emotional intuitions and perceptiveness were not limited to his understanding of how his peers viewed him. He showed acuity in his emotional insights related to everyday interactions with his peers as well as significant school events and activities. The everyday life of school elicited many emotions for James, and he had strategies in place to deal with them. These included "cuddling blankie", "taking a deep breath" and telling himself, "I have to take care of myself, so I have to be happy whatever other people call me and be brave" (James, interview, 29.11.21).

Coping with Challenges. During an interview session, James drew a comic depicting himself and his friends at school. In the comic, speaking about the dialogue box which says "I like school", James explained that it was because, "there is the library and we get to do the coding club on Tuesdays … and because I get to stay with my friends" (James, interview, 11.17.21). Two of the boxes in the comic had a lot of people in it. James described it as a "theatre" and indicated to himself hiding behind the curtain as he was feeling shy (Figure 11):

Figure 11

Comic Showing James in a School Play (Artwork by James)



Vani: Can you tell me a little bit about the theatre?

James: Well this is when I did my first ever dance.

Vani: Was that in school?

James: It was in a theatre.

Vani Who are the other people there?

James: Some of my friends and I was the scardest one, so I just hid but then I heard all of my other friends say, "let's play with Lego when we are finished," and I did the dance and I got to play the Lego.

Vani: Well done, how old were you?

James: I was….six! (James, interview, 17.11.21)

Recollecting his experience when he was six, James spoke about his fear of performing in front of an audience. While drawing himself hiding behind the curtain, he said he was shy and hesitant to go out to the stage. His mum later elaborated, "This was a school play that they had put up in the theatre outside when he was six… he was fantastic at the show, but what brought it up now was the wearable arts that is happening now and he is absolutely terrified of it" (James' mother, personal communication, 17.11.21). At the time of the interview, James'

class was involved in putting up a jungle themed 'wearable arts' show. The children were making costumes based on different animals and were to present them at a parade in front of the school and families. As his mother highlighted, being involved in the performance was unpleasant for James, however, he recalled some positive emotions related to performing in front of an audience from his experience of the school play. When asked about how he felt after the dance performance when he was six, James replied "I was proud, I just did it and I was able to play with my friends" (James, fieldnote entry, 17.11.21). James showed awareness of his emotions, and he was perceptive of the fact that despite feeling scared, he felt proud after performing the dance. While performing at the wearable arts parade was challenging for James, he drew on this insight of participating in the dance when he was six, to understand that he would be scared but he would be able to cope with the stress of having to participate in the parade.

James also faced challenging situations with his peers. The below instance describes one such unpleasant experience where James was the target of a joke by his peers:

> *The children were all completing a survey on the iPad. I made my way over to James and when he saw me, he asked me for help to spell 'embarrassing'. He was writing 'I am embarrassing' to a question. I asked him why he was writing that down. And he said it was because of that and pointed to the screensaver of the iPad. The screensaver was a photo of James which had a 'filter' where the face and neck were elongated, made from an app. I asked James if he had edited the photo and he said, "No, someone else did." I asked, "Do you know who it is?" and he said "No." (James, fieldnote entry, 08.11.21)*

Some of his peers in the class had set up the screensaver of the iPad to be an image of James that was morphed through the application. During other observations, this app was a source of hilarity for many of the children. With James, the photo was edited without his or his teacher's knowledge. When I asked him again if he was feeling embarrassed about the photo, he corrected me—"No, *I am* embarrassing*"*. James attributed the effect of the photo to how he viewed himself, that is, as someone different and "embarrassing". His teacher informed me that they were unable to identify the peers who were responsible for the photo, however, eventually, James figured out a way to change the screensaver back to what it was originally.

While such instances with peers were few, they prompted deep emotional responses in James, where he felt hurt, sad, and embarrassed. This highlights the challenges he faced in interacting with and understanding his peers as well as the complexity of emotions he experienced while navigating interactions in the classroom.

Being Perceptive of Difficult Situations. Another activity that James found challenging was Physical Education (P.E.). During P.E. activities, James struggled to be a part of the game and he was also usually overlooked by his peers when 'teaming up'. In the example below, James was frustrated with his inability to get the ball from his teammates. This led him to make interpretations of his abilities and how his peers viewed him:

> *James is grouped up with a few girls and is struggling to get the ball from them. (He is the one in the middle and as part of the game, he is supposed to try and get the ball which the others around him are passing around.) This goes on for a very long time and James is still unable to get the ball. Eventually, I see one of the girls in his group, intentionally pass it directly to him so that he can finally get the ball and switch positions. After a few minutes, he leaves the game and sits down on the bench. I asked him if he was planning to re-join the game after a break to which he replied, "No, I hate P.E, I hate running around and throwing a ball, I just want peace and quiet so that I can read… I don't know how to play netball, I can't play with my team because I am always getting it wrong." (James, fieldnote entry, 02.08.21)*

James expressed his dislike for P.E. vehemently, unlike his peers who appeared to enjoy P.E. His dislike for P.E. is also tied into his perceptions of not being wanted by his peers and states that he can't play with his team because he gets the game wrong. This is a source of worry for him. James also indicated on other occasions when he gets 'out' from a game that "they [peers] don't want me there, they just want me to be out!" (James, fieldnote entry, 27.10.21). When a P.E session was cancelled due to rainy weather and the teacher made the announcement, it was met with collective disappointment from the class. James, however, pumped his fists into the air with a "Yes!" (James, fieldnote entry, 17.11.21). His mother later informed me that he had not wanted to come to school that day, as he did not want to participate in P.E. James' feelings about P.E. and the varying emotions that it caused were strong enough

for him to want to avoid school altogether. James had coherent perceptions developed based on his past experiences. Although he could perform relatively well in other non-competitive physical activities during P.E, he perceived his apparent inability to perform well in competitive team games as the reason that prevented his peers from including him as a team member. Combined, his perceptions of 'being different' and 'not wanted' contributed to his sense of emotional challenges encountered regularly in school.

5.2.5 Everyday Interactions Within the Classroom

Friendships and play outside the classroom provided important socialising opportunities for James. However, casual interactions with peers were a prevalent part of everyday school life. For James, three main factors contributed to socialisation with other children within the classroom: (i) peer-initiated interactions, (ii) learning contexts and, (iii) spontaneous interactions fuelled by interests. The below vignettes highlight these different types of interactions and James' role within them as he navigated these interactions drawing on his capabilities, whilst also managing conflicts.

Being an Expert. While James typically found it challenging to be included by his peers in his class, on certain occasions, his peers would seek out his help or opinion, particularly when they wanted help and viewed him as an 'expert' in that domain. For instance, James was very proficient with games on the iPad and often his peers asked him for help as illustrated in the vignette below:

> *Having finished their classwork, the children were given some time to use the iPads in the classroom to play an educational math game. James was sitting in the corner of the classroom on the floor facing the wall/window and was playing the game on the iPad. I go over and sit at a table nearby. A girl comes over to James, holding her iPad and asks, "James, can you help me with the game?" James is fully engrossed in the game and does not respond. She asks him again and with a quick glance at her iPad, he gives her some instructions on the game. A bit later, a boy comes over and asks James for help with the game he is playing. James does not respond again. The boy pulls up a chair and sits near James and watches him play the game. He is mostly silent but addresses James in between with some suggestions*

for the game. James' teacher calls him and he leaves his iPad on the desk. While he is gone, the boy picks up the iPad and appears to continue the game. He says, "Look James you won." James comes back to his desk and tells the boy, "You helped me!" The two of them sit side by side engrossed in their game. (James, fieldnote entry, 16.11.21)

James' peers often sought him out when they needed something or his 'expertise' with regard to iPad games. However, in many instances, as in the example above, James does not respond as he is fully absorbed in the game. I wondered if these instances could be likened to an 'iPad bubble' for James when playing on his device as it seemed that his skills with iPad games served as both a facilitator and an impediment to his interaction with his peers.

However, not all peer-initiated interactions were for his strengths and skills. A few of the girls in his class made efforts to include him or stand up for him. These were instances of including James, however, these were few and far between. James' teacher was trying to encourage everyone to be more inclusive of James, and some of the girls had taken on this role more seriously than others:

One of the girls sitting at the table with James said, "I don't like [a child] anymore. He hits others. The other day he threw a sharpener at James!" I said, "Do you think it was an accident?" she said, "No it wasn't, and he was laughing." I said, "Did you do something?" She replied, "Yeah I told him to leave him [James] alone!" (James, fieldnote entry, 01.11.21)

Working with Others. Learning contexts that were facilitated by teachers or teacher-aides also provided opportunities for social and learning interactions between James and his peers. These learning contexts provided opportunities for collaborative work, negotiations, and problem solving as shown below. In the following extract, James is working on a task, assigned by his teacher, with a group. Learning contexts such as this one, where James was able to draw on his iPad skills, were examples of James working together with his peers within a goal directed activity:

James is part of a group with 3 other girls; the grouping arrangement was facilitated by the teacher. Their assignment is to make a music video on the

iPad for the jungle-themed wearable arts parade. The group finds a corner to work in. James is speaking fast and coming up with ideas with the other two girls. He is attempting to give instructions, as are the other girls, but everyone is speaking at the same time. They start recording a video of them playing some musical instruments. The children are constantly recording and re-recording with new ideas. James says, "Guys, let's do it this way… we need to do it in a rhythm, we can't just…ok 3,2,1!" James sways with the instrument, then calls out to the other girl, "OK, now walking!" (gesturing to one of the girls). "Come in rattlesnake…. come in elephant." One of the girls says, "James, you have to come in and walk first." James replies, "No no no. I will come in when this music plays (indicating with instrument). Okay restart!" (James, fieldnote entry, 23.11.21)

For this task, the children were helped by their teacher in forming groups. The teacher assigned a few children, including James, who did not have a group to one of the established ones. With a clear goal in mind (making a music video), James and his group negotiated the process involved and while it appears disordered initially, James attempted to bring in some organisation to the process by proposing an order in which the video should proceed. James was also familiar with the video editing application, and he shared the different 'settings' on the video recording with the other children. This interaction between James and his peers was marked by back and forth discussions, and trial and error, as they negotiated the best way to make the video. On the contrary, other learning contexts were sources of conflictual interactions with his peers as the below vignette highlights:

James and a group of 4 other girls are assigned the task of filling out a worksheet based on a reading that they were doing. The worksheet had 12 columns to be filled in and the children were debating about how the turns could be divided fairly. James suggests that 2 of them read the book, 2 write down the answers and 1 can just help. One girl says, "No, what about me? I don't get a turn then!" Another girl says, "Yeah James, that's not fair!" The children eventually start filling in the boxes without reaching a consensus. James' participation is intermittent, and his suggestions and answers are ignored by the girls. James wants to fill in the last two columns. However, this is again met with a chorus of "That's not fair!" One of the girls had

grabbed the reading book and was about to look through it, when James grabbed the same book, pulled it, and said, "I can look." Both of them are pulling the book with the girl saying, "I took the book! You can take another one!" He lets go of the book. The bell rings for the morning tea break and the task remains unfinished. (James, fieldnote entry, 07.12.21)

The key difference between the two instances is the children's interest in accessing James' iPad skills and knowledge. The first instance was more collaborative as the other children were aware of James' strength with an iPad. Similar to James' peers seeking out his help when it came to iPad applications and games, his suggestions were accepted by his peers when the task involved operating an iPad, and James himself was more motivated and interested when there were opportunities to draw on his skill. Conversely, in the second instance marked by conflict, the group were disinterested in James' suggestions and considered his plans to be unfair. There was a lack of negotiations or deliberations and the girls appeared to not give much importance to James's suggestions.

Making Choices. Many times, James initiated interactions with his peers but was also deliberate in choosing who to play with or spend time with. While James spent a significant amount of time with his friends from the next class during break time, sometimes he also chose not to play with a particular friend as illustrated in the following vignette. This was a momentary rejection of his friends or the friendship, as he would seek them out and play with them at a later time. The children referred to below were his friends from another class:

There was a boy in a cardboard cut-out of a dinosaur head, walking around like a T-rex and the children were screaming and escaping the T-rex. James saw his friends in the group and joined in seamlessly with the game saying, "C'mon, this way, you need to hide. Hey [child], you need to come here or the T-rex is going to get you!" After running away from the T-rex with his friends, they started another game spontaneously and James pretended to be a baby and started crawling around saying "goo goo gaa gaa." The bell was about to ring and I started making my way to the staff room for a quick lunch before afternoon observations and one of the boys started walking with me talking about the game.

James: Vani, I am playing with [child] not [the child who is walking with me]!
[Child who is walking with me]: But I started the game, James!
James: But I don't want to play with you…I want to play with [child].
Vani: Why don't you want to play with [child who is walking with me]?
James: Too many playdates! And [child he is playing with] is my friend. (James, fieldnote entry, 29.11.21)

In addition to choosing *not* to play with a friend in that moment, James was also deliberate in his choice of interactions with peers in his class. Often, these situations came about spontaneously and lasted for a short duration. They were typically driven by topics that were of interest to James. In the example below, James was sitting at a table with a few boys from his class and they were completing their individual tasks. The children at the table were chatting while working on their tasks. James was working independently and was not interacting with the other boys until the conversation shifted to a YouTube gamer:

The children were engaged in chatting and colouring when one of the boys said, "[YouTuber's name] is awesome!" James who was quietly engaged in his work by himself until then, responded with, "Wait, do you mean [YouTuber's name]? I love him. He is great!" This was followed by a few minutes of discussion about a particular game and the characters in it. James was excitedly talking for a few minutes. When one of the boys said, "I am only allowed to play Roblox once a week," James responded with "What? That is not okay!" (James, fieldnote entry, 15.09.21)

Initially, James appeared to be separate from the 'social unit' of the table, despite his proximity to the others. However, he chose to join in on the conversation when it shifted to something of interest to him. Thus, while in a lot of instances, James made efforts to be included in the peer groups of his classroom, he also exercised his agency in choosing when and with whom to socialise. His apparent exclusion from the peer groups was mainly evident when there was a mismatch between *his desire to interact with his peers* and his *peer's actions to include him,* that is, sometimes he chose to interact with others but was ignored or rebuffed.

5.3 Summary

This chapter highlighted how the social experiences of two autistic children, Harry and James, can be interpreted through play, peer interaction or non-interaction, their friendships, and through classroom dynamics as represented in this study. The observations and conversations I (as the researcher) had with these two children who were the main participants of this study, were contextualised and made rich by the contributions of their mothers and teachers. The findings were presented separately to highlight the unique experiences of the children. Perceptions of friendships were dynamic for both the children, and they approached their interactions with others through emotional intuitions and insights. This insight did not at times make sense to the children around them, or their teacher, but it was logical and intentional for each of the boys. Another important aspect of the children's social experiences was play, and through play as both a solitary and social activity, Harry and James established themselves as members of the social networks within the classroom. While certain aspects of the social interactions within their classroom and in the context of the wider school were challenging, Harry and James navigated the situations with flexibility, drawing on their strengths, perceptiveness, and adaptive strategies.

The key aspects regarding each child's experiences are summarised in Table 5.1 and Table 5.2. The findings indicate that while autistic children's experiences are distinct, they are not necessarily deficient or 'challenged', as compared to other children. Although some aspects of social engagement may be difficult for these children, these cannot be generalised across time and contexts. The social experiences summarised below may be typical of young children's social experiences in general observed in a classroom, and it is important that these 'ordinary' aspects of autistic experiences are foregrounded. These observable elements of the children's social experiences are made visible through a change in perspective, that allows inadvertently unnoticed lived experiences to be foregrounded, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences. Nevertheless, the experiences are also implicitly underscored by the children's sophisticated deliberations and meaning making which is explored further in Chapter 6.

Table 5.1

Summary of Harry's Social Experiences

Harry		
Friendships	**Play**	**Interactions**
• Harry's friendships were complex and multidimensional. His perceptions of, and engagement with his friends changed depending on contextual and personal factors. • Had established rules and determinants of friendship. • Did not always want or need friendships, however, he did want to be in a social environment.	• Harry played with his peers with agency and creativity. • Learned new things in play through trial and error. • Demonstrated a sense of fairness and justice in play. • Related to peers through establishing common interests.	• Strength-based interests and hobbies such as craft work facilitated interactions with peers . • Related with his peers through leading, and through teaching. • Connected with his peers through reciprocal interactions, giving and receiving support. • Engaged in conversations with peers over shared interests.

Table 5.2

Summary of James' Social Experiences

James		
Friendships	**Play**	**Interactions**
• Friendship groupings were often tenuous. • Demonstrated nuanced perceptions and understanding of friendship. • Faced challenges with having friends within class yet enjoyed close friendships with children from another class. • Was perceptive and appreciative of efforts made by his friends to make him feel included. • Was aware that sometimes he was viewed as 'different' by some friends.	• Engaged in play through collaboration and discussion. • Connected with peers through sharing and joint ownership of artefacts. • Engaged in exploring new possibilities in play through a shared sense of creativity and imagination with peers.	• Drew on and utilised expertise (e.g., iPad) to work and connect with others during academic and non-academic tasks. • Showed emotional intuitiveness and insights with regard to both positive and negative experiences. • Had strategies in place and demonstrated resilience in wider social contexts and interactions. • Engaged in conversations with peers over shared interests.

Chapter 6
Discussion

In diverse classrooms, children learn and play together. For autistic children, the relationships and interactions they have with their peers influence their sense of inclusion in the classroom, however, research has consistently shown the social challenges experienced by autistic children in their schools. At the same time, the children's lived social experiences and narratives of how they navigate the social environment at school require further attention in literature. Through an ethnographic methodology, this study foregrounded autistic children's social experiences at school. The findings from this study show three overarching and interrelated themes that reflect the children's socialisation within their classroom and school. The participant autistic children's social experiences were defined by (i) *multidimensional friendships,* (ii) *meaningful play,* and (iii) *self-determined interactions* to participate on their own terms within their classroom, and in other contexts at their school.

In this chapter, the three themes that make up the autistic children's social experiences are interrogated and situated in the context of literature. They align with the view that children's cultures are meaningful and worthwhile, and merit exploration outside of adult-centric views (Prout & James, 2015). Further, the discussion in this chapter also draws on the premises espoused in the paradigm of disabled children's childhood studies which calls for the narrative to shift from a deficit and tragic conceptualisation of disabled children's experiences to that of a strength-based approach where children's experiences are valued and take centre-stage (Curran & Runswick-Cole, 2014).

The interrelated nature of the three themes is reflective of the reality of ethnographic studies in schools, where observations are foregrounded. The findings from this research showed friendships, play, and interactions with peers all formed an important part of autistic children's experiences and contributed to their social inclusion. Acknowledging that there is an overlap between the themes, the discussion emphasises the contextual nature of the children's social experiences and their agency in navigating the social environment. An argument is made for a more sophisticated understanding of social inclusion that reflects the lived realities of autistic children in their schools.

6.1 Navigating the Multidimensionality of Friendships

In this study, multidimensional friendships refer to the experience of friendships by the autistic children as having multiple interlinked facets determined by, and facilitated through, individual and contextual factors. The findings of this study showed that autistic children's friendships can be experienced and valued in distinct and multipurpose ways. Although typically, friendship is regarded as a dyadic and voluntary relationship that is reciprocal and based on mutual liking (Bagwell, 2020; Hoffnung, 2019), this study highlighted how the autistic children's experiences of friendships were voluntary, but also dynamic, and ever evolving. The concept of friendship for the children involved development of new connections, alongside rejection of current friendships, albeit temporarily. Although autistic children may understand friendships in a similar manner as compared to their peers (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2019), their engagement with, and need for friendships varied. For example, autistic children show variation in how motivated they feel to engage in friendship experiences or spend time with other peers (Calder et al., 2013). Studies have shown that while autistic children report an expressed desire for friendships (Goodall, 2018; Hill, 2014), others have reported that they were content with the friendships they had (Cunningham, 2022; Petrina et al., 2017). Aligning with these varying friendship experiences of autistic children, the shifting nature of friendships for the two boys in this study, and the subtle connections they made, are reflective of the fact that there are different dimensions of being in a friendship group.

The autistic children's conceptualisations and experiences of friendships were fluid, transient, and contingent on the specific contexts within which it was understood and enacted. The way in which views on friendship were constructed and conceptualised by the participant children was influenced, and in turn, influenced how they navigated their social lives at school. Friendship expectations have been defined as "cognitive conceptualizations about attributes that individuals would like their friends to possess and behaviours that individuals would like their friends to enact" (Hall et al., 2011, p. 529). For the children in this study, kindness and 'being nice' were important attributes in a friend. For example, one of the participants, James, viewed friendship in terms of the kindness of others, and the kindness shown specifically to him. His insights that one of his friends made distinct efforts with the friendship and that his friend accepted him for who he is, was instrumental to James feeling included in the social group. His awareness that his friend did understand the challenges he faced meant that he was part of a friendship space that he perceived as understanding and safe. In a study that explored

the friendship expectations of autistic children as compared to their peers, Bottema-Beutel et al. (2019) found that the expectations of reliability and trust, kindness and caring, and help and reciprocity, were rated the highest by the participants, and this was similar to how their typically developing peers reported their friendship expectations. However, in their quantitative study, children with ASD differed from their peers in one particular expectation, expressing care, which was rated significantly higher than their peers (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2019). These expectations align with the qualitative findings in this current study that showed that autistic children *valued* kindness. Knowing peers who were kind to them and expressed care contributed to the autistic children's sense of safety, a criterion that was paramount in how they viewed friendships and inclusion. The current study further extends the findings of Bottema-Beutel et al. (2019) regarding autistic children's friendship expectations by highlighting that although desirable attributes (e.g., kindness) in a friend may remain relatively constant, perceptions of a friend itself could change depending on contextual factors. For example, children in this current study could perceive a 'kind' friend as 'mean' when their friend made unpleasant remarks or excluded the autistic child from play, and vice-versa. This highlights the inherently multidimensional and transient nature of friendships for the children in this study and shows that autistic children can capably recognise the subtleties, variations and evolving nature of friendships. On the other hand, Malloy et al. (2020) showed that there was a lack of consensus about friendship expectations that were valued by autistic children. Interestingly, in their study it was also seen that kindness as a friendship attribute was valued less by autistic children as compared to their non-autistic peers; however, the autistic children viewed being unkind as a violation within an existing friendship. These findings point to the potentiality that autistic children "may weigh subtle nuances in relation between kindness and friendship" (Malloy et al., 2020, p. 983). Taken together, the findings of the current study and previous research (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2019; Malloy et al., 2020), indicate that autistic children conceptualise and value friendships in unique and insightful ways.

The children's engagement with their peers through activities and conversations based on mutual interests, provided the contextual factors within which friendships were *initiated* or *maintained*, or both. Common interests such as those based on popular games or cartoons regularly made its way into daily conversations and make-believe games of the autistic children and their peers. Play and friendships were often built on these common points of interest between the children. This is consistent with developmental perspectives on friendships in early childhood where friendships are seen as involving companionship and shared activities

(Bagwell, 2020). These observations are also consistent with the study by Daniel and Billingsley (2010) involving autistic children aged 11–13 years, where sharing interests was shown as an important part of maintaining friendships for these children. In the current study, sharing common interests also facilitated shifts in the autistic children's perceptions of friends and peers. Through sharing interests, the participating autistic children in this study engaged positively with peers who were previously viewed unfavourably, or with whom the autistic children had unpleasant experiences. These positive interactions, where shared interests played an important role, facilitated a change in how the peer, and in turn, the relationship with the peer was perceived. Although such interactions were brief, it could be reasoned that sharing common interests enabled the autistic child to make an *initial* connection with a peer, flexibly adapting their perceptions in order to accommodate and test out this newfound connection. This flexibility within friendships has been noted by Hoffnung (2019), who highlighted how younger children's friendships tend to be more transient on account of being dominated by shared interests, with friendships being ended and reinstated often when interests change and develop. This current study extends the findings of Daniel and Billingsley (2010) by showing that sharing interests was not limited to maintaining friendships, but also extended to making *new connections* that could potentially initiate friendships.

The meaning that the autistic children in this current study attributed to friendships was continually negotiated and renegotiated with their friends. However, although meaningful and important to these children, this did not always align with traditional adult views of children's social experiences. There is some evidence that adults' perceptions of children's friendship engagement and acceptance using observations and other sociometric data, differ from the children's own perspective on their friendship's quality and their acceptance (Avramidis et al., 2018; Calder et al., 2013). While the children in this study experienced difficulties with some aspects of their social lives in the classroom, they did show how they were prepared to make new peer connections, and subsequently enjoyed both emerging friendships and sustained existing ones. This possibly indicates that some autistic children are generally comfortable and content with their friendship groups, and with the level of engagement they have with their peers (see also Cunningham, 2022; Little et al., 2022).

Conflicts and challenges are inherent in any friendships, and for autistic children, this is a particular area of concern, as was also seen in this current study. A potential reason for the challenges experienced by autistic children is that these children may misinterpret or miss

social nuances leading to their peers ignoring these children's efforts to initiate or engage in friendships (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Black et al. (2024) also reported that autistic people face difficulties in navigating neurotypical relationships, norms, and the understanding of social cues in interactions with neurotypical individuals. While some of the children's experiences in this study are consistent with current research that foregrounds the friendship challenges experienced by autistic children, these findings also challenge the assumption that autistic children experience poorer quality friendships as compared to their peers (e.g., Kasari et al., 2011). Concurring with Calder et al. (2013), it is possible that the autistic children experienced friendships differently, and navigated challenges drawing on their own insights and perceptions in ways that were significant to their contextual experiences.

The autistic children's younger ages may have been a factor in their experiences of being included in many instances and experiencing positive social relationships. Studies with primary school-aged autistic participants have indeed shown positive social experiences (Cunningham, 2022; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010), but difficulties with peer relationships increase as they get older (Cresswell et al., 2019; Mamas et al., 2021). Longitudinal studies that examine how autistic children's friendships evolve over the course of their development are limited (Petrina et al., 2021), therefore this interpretation that the participant's younger ages contributed to their positive peer experiences is tentative. Given the participants in this current study were also observed to have high verbal skills, this would likely have contributed to the facilitation of their friendship development and engagement with peers, as cognitive and verbal abilities have been found to be important contributors to friendship (Bauminger-Zviely, 2013).

The complexities of peer relationships for the two children in this study are evident in the robust, yet dynamic nature of friendships for the boys. The friendships were multidimensional, at times unstable, and also frequently renegotiated, steered by their agency and insight. The children themselves, however, valued these connections which were important for them. The next section will explore more specifically the *play* experiences for the participating children, experienced both within the context of friendships and outside of it.

6.2 Engaging in Meaningful Play

The autistic children in this study engaged in rich and complex play cultures that enabled them to relate to and connect with their peers in meaningful ways. Play is difficult to

define given its broad nature and scope (Zosh et al., 2018). Gray (2017) characterises it by the voluntary and typically self-directed nature of the activity as chosen by the child, engaged in for its own sake and not for external goals. Play is also considered to have flexible structures and rules, and elements of imagination. Zosh et al. (2018) conceptualise play within a spectrum involving free play, guided play, and adult-directed play and argues that this enables the essence of play to remain intact, "where children experience joy and have agency in their play contexts while also recognizing that play may take many different forms and serve many different functions" (p. 2). When considering the experiences of autistic children, many aspects of how play is defined in general are often not used to describe autistic children's play; rather their play is defined in terms of what it is not, or what is missing. For example, Wolfberg (2015) writes that "children with autism are at a distinct disadvantage for deriving the joy and benefits that play experiences can afford" (p. 63). In the current study, play was an integral part of the social lives of the boys at school, cutting across the boundaries of friendships and inherent in multiple aspects of their school and classroom activities. For these children playing was not restricted to simply playing 'with friends'; play enabled and facilitated their engagement and connections with peers outside of the friendship group. In other words, play served a specific function where it enabled the autistic children to make sense of their world through imagination and fantasy, and also included the child within the peer groups in their classroom.

Autistic children's play can be rich and varied, whether playing independently or when playing with their peers in a group. Importantly, the children's play culture in this study across the two terms revealed extensive examples of symbolic play, sociodramatic play, and social play with peers. These were always meaningful to the children themselves, and indeed the children expressed these as joyful and fun activities. Pretend or symbolic play is "the symbolic use of an object or action and can be described as having an 'as if' quality" (Chaudry & Dissanayake, 2016, p. 32). The autistic children's ability to imagine, reimagine and repurpose everyday objects in creative and symbolic ways (e.g., a cardboard box as a spaceship), formed the building blocks of vibrant sociodramatic play. Sociodramatic play is a sophisticated form of pretence within a complex and organised narrative that incorporates planning and negotiations (Vasc & Lillard, 2020). In this study, the participant children developed intricate storylines involving castles, kings, sand-cities, and pop culture elements that were continually conceptualised and incorporated into play. In general, children aged 4–8 enjoy pretending or make-belief sociodramatic play, making use of everyday objects as props in creative ways (Johnson, 2015), and the participants' play was consistent with this. Additionally, the

imaginative and sociodramatic play of autistic children is also consistent with reports by autistic adults. In their study, Pritchard-Rowe et al. (2023) interviewed autistic adults about their past and current play experience and it was seen that several autistic individuals described engaging in highly imaginative play.

The current study showed the importance of recognising the intrinsic value of the authentic and organic play of autistic children, as initiated and sustained by them, in enhancing their social engagement within their classroom. Importantly, play facilitated the children's inclusion through the use of minimal resources or resources that are easily available and accessible in a school, such as craft paper or sand in a sand-pit, which were resourcefully and creatively utilised by the autistic children and their peers. This is pertinent because a lack of teaching materials and resources has been identified as a concern among teachers for the effective implementation of inclusion for children who experience disabilities (Chow et al., 2023). Social skills training that makes use of varied programmes that incorporate technology, games and other resources is used extensively to support the social inclusion of autistic children and children who experience other disabilities (Koller & Stoddart, 2021). These approaches target children's play skills and other social skills and are aligned with a deficit approach. Arguably, such strategies and approaches to support autistic children's play and social inclusion also require material resources, in addition to significant time and effort on the part of educators, parents or others implementing these strategies. However, as this study showed, naturalistic and spontaneous play where autistic children's agency is unimpeded can in itself be an important context for inclusion even in the absence of targeted classroom-based resources or interventions using technological aides. Play provided opportunities for the autistic children to become centrally situated in the peer group, although temporarily, as the uniqueness of the fantasy and make-belief play initiated by these children drew in and engaged other peers in the classroom within their play.

Of particular interest, autistic children in this study embraced and included their peers in play even when it was originally initiated as a solitary activity. This in turn contributed to their social inclusion within the peer group. These instances provided opportunities for peers to enter the autistic child's world through play, albeit in many cases on the autistic child's terms. As shown by the children in this study, autistic children sometimes prefer to play alone, and this solitary play might provide the initial context for imaginative sociodramatic play. This is an important aspect for a child's learning where exploring the environment through self-

initiated play and discovery enables the child to make sense of their understanding of the world around them (Vygotsky, 1967). Nevertheless, these contexts can also develop into social and collaborative play with peers on the same day, or even across a few days, and these instances were often facilitated through the autistic child's agency. Conn (2014) argues that "social contexts unfold, develop, and change shape over time" (p. 69), and this evolving nature of social contexts over time is also an element of autistic children's play experiences. In Conn's description of an 8-year-old autistic boy, she discusses how an instance of imaginative play between the autistic boy and a peer that lasted several weeks eventually waned and the children stopped engaging in the jointly developed play together. The author contends that in repetitive prolonged play, the game needs to change slightly with new creative or imaginative elements added for it to be sustained with enjoyment, and a discrepancy in the shared understanding of new pretend elements could have contributed to the children's play ending (Conn, 2014). While there are times when monotony can bring an instance of joint social play to an end, conversely, as this current study showed, the addition of new play elements to routine or solitary play can initiate a progression to more elaborate and joint imaginative play. The autistic children in this study, through their spontaneous solitary play, contributed unique fantasy elements to the social environment in the classroom that were attractive to other children. Consequently, the other children joined in with the autistic children's play while also contributing new aspects to the play scenario. Together, the children co-created play experiences that were enjoyable and meaningful to them.

Within collaboratively developed play experiences, the participating children used play as a context for negotiation of meaning, and for shared teaching and learning, where the two aspects often overlapped. Negotiation of meaning is inherent in children's play. Bergen and Fromberg (2015) highlight that children engage in intrinsic conversation with others and negotiate symbolic meanings attributed to different situations and objects. In the current study, examples of this were seen when the children developed and negotiated symbolic meaning in their sociodramatic play that involved many intricate components. Through these negotiations, the autistic children and their peers also co-created learning experiences by observing each other, often through trial and error, and outside of structured learning contexts. This is consistent with the view of play and learning as interdependent and interrelated dimensions through which children make sense of their world (Claughton, 2017; Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006).

Teachers and teacher-aides played a role in shared spaces of learning within play, sometimes initiating these with the children, and at other times sustaining what the children had started. By supporting the autistic child's sense of self-discovery and encouraging the children's joint learning through exploration and trial and error (e.g., supporting Harry and his peers as they made 'armour' using paper, see Section 1.1.3), teachers or teacher-aides reinforced the message that their play was important, or the development of their ideas was valued. At other times, the teacher or teacher-aide also negotiated opportunities for the autistic child to contribute their skills with other children in the classroom through play situations and interactions. In this way, supporting and following children's meaning-making in play, teachers were instrumental in integrating the dimensions of play and learning, as this study showed; something also highlighted by Samuelsson and Johansson (2006). Further, Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) argue that "the teachers way of acting must be built upon a respect for children's play world, and on a competence to understand that, when and in what way teachers can act in order to give these dimensions a chance to interact" (p. 63). As was seen in this study, ongoing negotiations of meaning with peers that were self-initiated, and at times teacher-facilitated, provided the autistic children with an opportunity for meaningful and influential contributions to the emerging play scenarios, as they participated in 'shared imaginations' within the peer group. This study extends the understanding of play as spaces of shared learning where meaning is negotiated by showing how play enabled autistic children to become agentic and focused.

The children's engagement in elaborate play, often pretend and sociodramatic with their peers, challenges established research findings that autistic children experience difficulties in, have an absence of, or engage in less spontaneous pretend or symbolic play as compared to their peers (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 1987; González-Sala et al., 2021; Jarrold, 2003; Lee et al., 2016; Wing et al., 1977). The autistic children's imaginative interpretation of their play worlds, alongside other children, was indicative of their abilities and willingness to engage socially with their peers. This debunks the notion that autistic children are seriously challenged in their ability to play with others. For example, Papoudi and Kossyvaki (2018) noted that "it is well documented in the literature that children with autism encounter serious difficulties in joint attention and in engaging in spontaneous, socially acceptable play, as well as participating in dyadic play and, later, peer play" (p. 565). The view that autistic children struggle with imaginative socially-based play is also reflected in the current diagnostic criteria (DSM 5-TR) for Autism Spectrum Disorder wherein one of the components point to "difficulties in sharing

imaginative play or in making friends" (APA, 2022, p. 56). Consequently, several research studies have highlighted the need for autistic children to have access to relevant support and intervention to aid their play (e.g., Barnett, 2018; Gibson et al., 2021). Goodley and Runswick-Cole (2010) cautioned that this could cause the *intrinsic* value of play to be disregarded. While in this current study there were observable challenges and conflicts for both children in their play with peers, their play was not defined by these difficulties. These experiences appeared consistent with the nature of the play for other non-autistic children in the same classroom. The current study showed that the autistic children initiated rich play, and contributed positively to the peer culture around them in an intentional way through their play. This furthers the understanding of the role of play in the lives of young autistic children and pushes the boundaries of the current conceptualisations of autistic play.

There are plausible explanations for why the findings from this current study with regards to the participants' play, challenge findings from other studies that report autistic children's deficits in symbolic and imaginative play. A primary reason could be the ethnographic setting of the present study, as opposed to the more structured contexts in which play was explored in other studies. For example, a recent scoping review of research on symbolic play among children with autism spectrum disorders conducted since 1943 concluded that these children experience more difficulties in symbolic play, particularly in spontaneous symbolic play, as compared to children with other neurodevelopmental disorders and children with typical development (González-Sala et al., 2021). Many studies included in this review made use of standardised instruments to assess play with some being done in laboratory settings. In contrast, the naturalistic element of this present study allowed for more realistically occurring observations of children's play within their world, offering a different lens through which to view these children's play. This was representative of the authentic experiences of these children which may not conform to the adult or normative expectations of how children's play is expressed. This notion is consistent with some studies that qualitatively explored the play of children with impairments including autism and highlighted the self-determined, meaningful, and nuanced way in which these children engaged in play (Burke, 2012; Burke & Claughton, 2019).

Given that pretence and language are both part of symbolic development (Vasc & Lillard, 2020), the participating boys' high verbal skills was another factor that contributed to their rich play culture. Previous studies involving autistic children have shown a significant

relationship between play and expressive language (Pecukonis et al., 2019; Thiemann-Bourque et al., 2012; Van der Paelt et al., 2014). Similarly, in an ethnographic study of autistic children's play, Kangas et al. (2012) found that autistic children with developed verbal skills were able to play with others in groups. Given that the children in this present study were observed to use their verbal skills to collaborate and communicate with their peers in both positive and negative ways depending on the situation, this was a factor that facilitated their engagement in play.

It is interesting that while the autistic children in this study engaged and shared in imaginative play with their peers, they also guided the direction of play, especially with regard to the sociodramatic elements in their play. To do this, they demonstrated agency in their ability and willingness to initiate and influence the play cultures around them. Regardless of how well they were socially included within their classroom on any day, it was the play opportunities that enabled the participants to negotiate and decide their own unique roles (and at times, their peers' roles) within the peer group cultures. This study showed that play as a vehicle for socialisation and inclusion for these children was a two-way process. Opportunities to play enabled the autistic children to authentically engage with their peers who had like-minded interests, while also providing ways for their peers to forge authentic connections with them.

6.3 Self-Determined Interactions

Social interactions between peers typically involve several children, are intermittent and occur across various situations and contexts. It is the "reciprocal process in which children effectively initiate and respond to social stimuli presented by their peers" (Bauminger-Zviely, 2013, p. 60). Outside of the friendship group, the children in this study interacted with peers in varied and intermittent ways. These engagements or connections were at times initiated by the children themselves, and at other times by a peer or facilitated by a teacher. Opportunities for interactions arose in several ways including the context of working together on classwork tasks, spontaneous conversations over common interests, engaging in play or planning for future play, and reciprocal helping. In this study, the participant children's interactions with peers could also be negative at times, as is typical for children. Even in such circumstances, the autistic children's ability to draw on strategies to work through these negative experiences is notable. The autistic children's interactions in this study were defined by: (i) purposeful and intrinsically motivated choices (ii) social conversations to connect with peers, and (ii) coping strategies to address negative interactions.

The children's autonomy in their interactions played a key role in how they managed their time and purpose. The children in this study showed a capacity for choice and independent action when determining whom to interact with and when, as well as what type of activities to engage in. For example, this was evident in the deliberate decisions made by the children such as spending independent time pursuing an art project or game, getting involved with their peers in collaborative engagements, or *choosing* to spend time with an adult (usually a teacher-aide and on some occasions, with myself, the researcher) to engage in an activity of the child's choice. What distinguished these choices made by the children was their intrinsic motivation to engage with an activity or a particular person, that is, these instances of agency were observed outside of their normal routine classroom activities with pre-determined tasks as set by the teacher. This was evident in the way they directed their attention towards one thing in the presence of alternative options. Further, decisions to play independently were not made in the absence of peers willing to play with them, nor did it imply that they preferred solitude at all times. As Harry stated, he was internally motivated to engage in solitary play because "it's cooler" (Harry, fieldnote entry, 13.12.21). The findings that the autistic children at times preferred, and were satisfied, to engage in solitary activities are corroborated by some studies that have qualitatively examined autistic children's school experiences and friendships (Calder et al., 2013; Cunningham, 2022). Some participants in the study undertaken by Calder et al. (2013) specifically reported on their desire to be alone at times. Calder and colleagues emphasise that not all autistic children desire or even need the same level of social involvement as their peers. In the current study, the interaction preferences of the children were not rigid, and it was also possible for them to embody different preferences on occasion depending on their personal and social context. Such changing and fluid friendship or peer-engagement preferences are typical of all children and are not "bound to autism" (Kangas et al., 2011, p. 169).

The ability to hold social conversations were inherent in the autistic children's interactions with their peers, and while the content of these conversations were often of an unusual nature to adults, they were relevant to, and understood by, the children themselves in connecting with peers. This has also been observed in children's peer culture in general (Köngäs et al., 2022). Following ethnographic observations of children's play cultures in an early childhood education setting, Köngäs et al. (2022) noted that "children seemed to handle their peer culture through small talk that the adults did not get or even recognize" (p. 1538). Bauminger-Zviely (2013) notes that social conversation between children involves attempts to

get to know a peer or a friend better where children share experiences and feelings, rather than just information. Social conversations thus serve the purpose of being involved with peers and may also have an underlying motivation for some other gain. The ethnographic nature of this study allowed for authentic observations of the children's conversations that they used to navigate their interactions with peers. A feature of these social conversations was the sharing of ideas, connecting over common interests, and motivations towards specific play activities and goals. The current study showed that the autistic children capably related to their peers through such 'small talk' or conversations. However, there is a dearth of qualitative studies that have examined autistic children's social conversations with their peers. A quantitative examination of spontaneous peer conversations among high-functioning children with ASD aged 3–6 by Bauminger-Zviely et al. (2014), identified pragmatic deficits, seen in conversational qualities and capabilities that included verbal behaviours and nonverbal gestures, in autistic children as compared to their typically developing peers. Interestingly, Bauminger-Zviely et al. (2014) also showed that high-functioning autistic children engaged in more adequate and complex social conversations when their conversation partner was defined as a 'friend'. The authors suggested that supporting autistic children's engagement in peer talk with friends can facilitate better peer relations for these children (Bauminger-Zviely et al., 2014). The current study extends these findings and highlights that autistic children can, and do, engage in meaningful and spontaneous conversations with peers outside typical friendship groups. Connecting over shared interests and common goals enabled and facilitated positive peer interactions and experiences, although the peer may not necessarily be defined as a friend by the autistic child. This aligns with the findings from a recent study by Sturrock et al. (2021). In their study, Sturrock et al. (2021) interviewed autistic children aged 9–14 about their experiences of subtle language and communication difficulties. Although children in the study expressed that they found it difficult to initiate conversations with others, it was also seen that for some children, shared interests facilitated initial conversations and the development of friendships with peers.

At the same time, negative interactions including perceived bullying, were a part of the social experiences for the autistic children in this study. This observation is not unexpected in the context of consistent research showing that autistic children experience considerable bullying and victimisation (Bitsika & Sharpley, 2014; Cresswell et al., 2019; Yi & Siu, 2021). In the current study, the participant children were sometimes excluded despite making efforts to join in with others, or at times were the target of apparently humorous pranks by their peers,

which were not perceived as such by the autistic children themselves. For one of the participating boys in particular, such interactions were often exacerbated by the negative perceptions he held of himself. Bitsika and Sharpley (2014) showed similar findings in a study involving autistic boys aged 9–12 years who reported frequent bullying including being the target of jokes, name-calling, being excluded from play or group activities, and other forms of verbal and physical bullying.

In the face of challenging and negative interactions with their peers, the autistic children in the current study made purposeful decisions such as taking steps to join in on play or making use of coping strategies such as breathing exercises or telling their teacher. They remained motivated to stay connected, so although the children were perceptive of difficult situations, they demonstrated intuitive insights on coping with these challenges and negotiating conflicts. Such incidents highlighted their resilience in the face of conflict, and their own motivation to be happy within the classroom. This is poignantly seen in this statement made by one of the participants: "I have to take care of myself, so I have to be happy whatever other people call me and be brave" (James, interview, 29.11.21). These observations correspond with the findings of a review of peer experiences among autistic adolescents by Cresswell et al. (2019). In their review, the authors identified that despite facing many challenges in peer relationships, the adolescents showed "resourcefulness and resilience in their efforts to overcome these challenges" (p. 57). The findings of the current study show emerging evidence of this resilience in younger autistic children as they cope with challenging day-to-day peer experiences.

The autistic children in this study demonstrated agency and deliberateness in navigating both their positive and negative relations with their peers, suggesting that their involvement in the social worlds of the classroom was self-managed and feasibly self-determined. The children's intrinsic motivation to spend time with others (and at other times to play in isolation) played a role in how they interpreted and navigated the social culture around them. Self-determination in goal-directed activities refers to "the extent to which they are enacted with a full sense of volition and choice" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 237). An individual's behaviour is considered to be self-determined when that individual is intrinsically motivated towards a goal. The three basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020) are relevant here. Autonomy refers to the sense of initiative and ability to choose one's actions without perceived external control, which was exemplified through specific and considered choices made by the participant children in their interactions

with peers. Competence refers to the self-belief in one's ability to succeed and experience mastery for the task or activity at hand, and this was seen through the boys' demonstration of expertise and leadership within their group, as well as through their self-reliance on coping strategies to navigate challenging peer interactions. Relatedness, which refers to the need for meaningful connections with others, was realised through their conversations and sharing interests and goals with their friends and other peers. Taken together, it is reasonable to see how self-determination played a role in how the autistic children navigated their social interactions at school, in both subtle and overt ways.

The context within which the autistic children's agency became visible in their interactions with peers, clearly took place with surrounding teacher-driven factors. The teachers within the classroom (while not being a focus of this research) also influenced how the autistic children and their peers initiated and experienced interactions in the classroom. The teachers in this study did not always engage directly with all child-peer social interactions, but enabled these to continue where possible (e.g., the children's play in the 'spaceship', see section 5.2.2), and intervened when necessary (e.g., the children's conflict around using the makeshift 'hut', see section 5.1.1). Given teachers are uniquely situated to impact and influence the social dynamics of peer interactions in a classroom (Farmer et al., 2019), the teachers in this present study played a role in negotiating conflicting situations among autistic children and their peers, facilitating the engagement of the autistic child in classroom group work, as well as creating and sustaining an environment that promoted positive classroom dynamics, all of which contributed to how peer interactions were experienced by participant children. For example, when James' peers made concerted efforts to include him or defend him against negative interaction with other peers, this was consistent with the way their teacher had regularly emphasised the importance of positive relationships in the classroom. This "invisible hand" of the teacher was an important operating force in the classroom, given teachers influence the social dynamics both positively and negatively, and "promotes students' self-directed, autonomous, and developmentally productive peer experiences"(Farmer et al., 2011, p. 249).

Several quantitative and observational studies have indicated that autistic children and adolescents, including those identified as high functioning and cognitively able, are often on the margins of peer groups in the classroom. They experience limited engagement in the social networks in the classroom (Kasari et al., 2011), have fewer reciprocal friendships (Rotheram-

Fuller et al., 2010) and have difficulties in social conversation and peer relationships (da Silva & Fernandes, 2016). Although the observations made in this study concur with some of these findings, the present study also highlights the nature of these interactions (or lack of) through the lens of the children themselves. Simply put, whilst autistic children may spend more time by themselves, have smaller social networks, and face social challenges in the classroom, these can be underscored by the sophisticated deliberation and intrinsic motivation in the context of their social interactions. Autistic children can and do positively influence and make a difference in their own social lives when given the opportunity, time, and freedom to participate independently or collaborate with peers through their unique social lens.

6.4 Children's Experiences of Social Inclusion and Exclusion

There is no single definition or purpose of inclusion in educational contexts (Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). Booth and Ainscow (2011) argued that "inclusion is about increasing participation for all children and adults. It is about supporting schools to become more responsive to the diversity of children's background, interests, experience, knowledge and skills" (p. 9). In New Zealand, the Ministry of Education states that:

> Inclusive education means all children and young people are engaged and achieve through being present, participating, learning and belonging. It means all learners are welcomed by their local early learning service and school, and are supported to play, learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of life at the school or service. (Ministry of Education, 2024b, What Inclusive Education Means section)

On the other hand, Goodall (2020b) argued that "the ubiquitous use of the term 'inclusion', particularly 'mainstream inclusion', often describes pedagogy which is, in reality, assimilationist, integrationist and at worst exclusionary" (p. 14). Social inclusion is an important part of successful inclusive educational experiences for children and influences their ability to learn (Juvonen et al., 2019), however, the term social inclusion with regards to children who experience disabilities is also contentious (Koller et al., 2018). While some researchers have argued that inclusion must logically include the notion of *social* inclusion (Koster et al., 2009), others have emphasised that the term social inclusion must be retained as a separate construct (Little, 2017b). With regards to children with special education needs,

Koster et al. (2009) refer to the term social *participation* as having positive interactions and friendships in the classroom, being accepted by peers, as well as the feeling of acceptance among the children with SEN. Little (2017b) argues that social inclusion is seen through the presence of enduring friendships, self-initiated participation in activities and being accepted by peers. The themes of the children's social experiences in the current study are consistent with previous research that showed that friendships, acceptance, and positive interactions made up the dimensions of social inclusion and participation (Bossaert et al., 2013; Koster et al., 2009). The present study furthers these existing conceptualisations by expanding on the central role that autistic children intentionally play in their own social inclusion experiences through their agentic intentional actions.

Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018) note that in most definitions of inclusion, children's own experiences are not considered. This is particularly important to note given that autistic children conceptualise inclusion differently from the way adults view and define inclusion (Goodall, 2020a; Lüddeckens, 2021). For these children, inclusion goes beyond just structural and functional changes in the environment and involves the feeling of belonging, being respected and valued, and enjoying positive relationships with others (Goodall, 2020a). Social participation, acceptance by their peers, and having friends are very important for autistic children's sense of overall inclusion (Lüddeckens, 2021). The children in the current study clearly showed that when being socially included, they experienced an observable sense of happiness and enjoyment. Consistent with other empirical evidence, positive relationship and friendships with peers plays a crucial in the mental health and well-being of children (O'Connor et al., 2022). Despite this, as highlighted in the literature review chapter (Chapter 2), research shows that autistic children continue to face social exclusion and other challenges in school. As the findings of the current study showed, an enduring and consistent state of social participation and inclusion may not always be possible and is not reflective of the children's lived realities. For the autistic children in this study, social inclusion can be conceptualised as recurrent instances of positive social engagement in friendships, play, and interactions, and acceptance in the peer groups, as experienced by the children.

This study showed that autistic children experience both social inclusion and social exclusion often simultaneously; each can occur in the same social context, within relatively constant social circles, and can also change over time and across different social activities and settings. Within the current study, this means that, while in many instances the participating

children became active members of the peer groups through their purposeful social engagement, this state of social inclusion was not predictable, and neither stable nor enduring. Although many aspects of the autistic children's experiences in this study align with the definitions of social inclusion (e.g., Little, 2017b), the degree and *extent* to which they were socially included remained tenuous. On the other hand, neither were the children's experiences indicative of systematic social exclusion from the peer groups. The notion that social inclusion and social exclusion are not mutually exclusive concurs with the dimensions of inclusion proposed by Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018). They argue that it is important to consider the degree of inclusion and that the process of inclusion and exclusion can both occur concurrently in different arenas within the school context. For example, whilst a child might be formally included in educational activities in the classroom, they might face exclusion from peers in the playground or from certain groups of children. Exclusion and inclusion, in this sense, are not dichotomous, and as the current study showed, this is also true for the social aspects of inclusion and exclusion.

The experiences highlighted in this study show that autistic children's awareness of how they are viewed by their peers can influence their subsequent social action, and in turn their social inclusion and exclusion in other contexts. Consistent with the findings of other researchers (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Williams et al., 2019), peers played a determining role in the autistic children's self-perception in the study, and this was particularly true for one of the participants, James. Ironically, in the present study, the same peers who supported the autistic children's sense of inclusion also contributed to their social exclusion at other times. Similar findings have been reported by Bitsika and Sharpley (2014) who explored the bullying experiences of 48 boys with ASD. In their study, 39.6% of the boys reported that they experienced bullying from children whom they considered to be their friends. Within this current study, James' experience with his friends exemplifies this point when he states that "my friends know that I am autism so they let me play with them and don't fight in front of me" (James, interview, 08.11.21), but at other times when he is excluded from play, he reasons that this is because his peers perceive him as "whiny and always crying" (James, interview, 29.11.21). Not only did this exclude him at that moment, but it also perpetuated his understanding of the reasons for the exclusion in other instances. His perception of himself as 'being different', or of being 'whiny and always crying', was developed through peer feedback, preventing him at times from seeking out other play companions or engaging in physical education games. As his mother indicated, this also resulted in James wanting to avoid school

altogether, raising questions regarding the extent to which he feels socially included. The perpetuating impact of self-perceptions on autistic children's social inclusion and exclusion is further supported by a meta-synthesis by Williams et al. (2019). The authors identified that autistic children, as James himself indicated, often perceived themselves as different, and the experiences they had with their peers contributed to their self-perceptions. Ongoing negative and challenging experiences with their peers, does reduce the children's self-initiated interactions resulting in more social isolation (Williams et al., 2019). Even so, some positive peer experiences contributed to a better sense of self for the children, as shown in this study, and as reported by a minority of children in Williams et al. (2019).

The children in the present study experienced direct and indirect social exclusion in informal social interactions and play, as well as in formal learning contexts. Social exclusion can be manifested verbally, through body language, gestures, and through silence (Niemi & Vehkakoski, 2023; Watson, 2016). Watson (2016) argues that children develop an understanding of 'differences', through observations of others as well as discourses operating in the context around them. They are aware of the typically understood norm-based ways of being and behaving and the type of practices others engage in to sustain this stance. In the current study, this was visible in how James' friends viewed and understood him as 'autistic' and in his teacher's descriptions of his 'behavioural outbursts' that resulted in his peers avoiding him, arguably because his demeanour is a deviation from the typically understood normal (Watson, 2016). On the other hand, social exclusion was also at times, direct and explicit, such as outright rejection from play as experienced by Harry in several instances. However, other forms of exclusion were more implicit and showed a power imbalance among the children, for example, when the autistic child was physically included in collaborative-based learning activities, but their ideas and inputs were ignored or not considered. This aligns with the findings of Niemi and Vehkakoski (2023). In their study exploring social inclusion and exclusion in collaborative learning contexts, the authors highlighted that some children can experience social exclusion in a learning context when they are positioned as less knowledgeable by their peers. In the present study, it is possible that such power differentials among autistic children and their peers were in operation, contributing to instances of their exclusion, especially in group learning activities in the classroom.

Even in the context of challenging peer experiences, it is noteworthy that the children in this research showed the desire, and motivation to be included, and at times, initiated and

sustained actions to facilitate their social inclusion. Within group learning contexts, where they faced potential rejection, the autistic children asserted themselves by negotiating and collaborating with their peers and this was reflective of their agency to be socially included in the peer groups of their classroom. Niemi and Vehkakoski (2023) showed that although some children with special education needs were socially excluded in learning contexts, these children made persistent efforts to establish themselves within the group. The experiences of the autistic children in this study align with these findings, and I would argue that these children were able to counter some of these social exclusion effects by making consistent and agentic decisions, on their own terms, to be socially included both within and outside of the learning context in their classroom. Consistent with other literature (e.g., Lüddeckens, 2021), these experiences highlight how positive and inclusive social experiences at school are important considerations for autistic children.

6.5 Summary

The current study showed the autistic children's active role in their social world was constant and ongoing, with the children themselves reflective and aware of their role in the social world of their classroom. This study demonstrated how the children shaped their experiences, influenced the social interactions around them, and were in turn influenced by their interactions and engagement with others. Developing new friendships and sustaining established ones, having opportunities to engage in play in a meaningful manner, and connecting and relating to their peers through interactions all contributed to a sense of social inclusion for the children in this study, and was undertaken with considerable energy and effort on their part. The children in this study contributed meaningfully to the peer cultures around them, and 'meaning', whether in play, friendships, or interactions, was continually negotiated and renegotiated with their peers. Within play, the boys' meaningful contributions were most evident in their imaginative conceptualisations of play scenarios that drew in other children by the sheer vision and creativity within these narratives. The children also contributed meaning through teaching and learning collaboratively in their interactions with peers. Meaning was also evident in the way that they defined friendships, and actively moved within and across peer groups and friendships. The meaning attributed to friendship was unique and personal for each of the participants and this was fluid and adaptable, depending on the context. The children were also deeply and intentionally *involved* in the social aspects that they *chose* to engage with, be it play, friendships or interactions. The children's intentional involvement was

most evident in their play. Intentionality in these instances was seen in the planning and coordination that was involved and undertaken by the children, be it planning of costumes for different role-play identities or coordinating different ‘characters’ in socio-dramatic play. Involvement in the peer culture is also demonstrated through the connection that the participants made with others, primarily through sharing interests. Sharing interests with peers facilitated the boys’ meaningful contributions as well as their intentional and self-determined involvement in the social experiences. Interests could take the form of hobbies and passions, but also, values and beliefs such as those related to friendships. Sharing interests also extended to ideas such as those that initiated rich play or those that added value to a group learning task.

Although the children’s active agency facilitated their successful social inclusion in many contexts, they were also rejected or excluded by their peers at other times. Peer dynamics played an important role in influencing autistic children’s sense of inclusion or exclusion. Taken together, this study highlights that autistic children’s social experiences are complex, but also self-determined, and meaningful to the children themselves. Given that social inclusion and exclusion are not mutually exclusive, autistic children’s experiences must be understood holistically. Autistic young people want their teachers and peers to understand their social needs and experiences (Goodall, 2020a) as emphasised and illustrated by the children in this current study.

Chapter 7
Conclusion

This research showed that autistic children's social experiences are characterised by its diversity and are navigated purposefully by the children; they are capable agents who are involved in the active construction and interpretation of their social realities. Further, the experiences foregrounded in this study show how autistic children's social experiences in their school have greater depth than might be initially perceived when observing the children in the classroom. The two autistic children's experiences of their school lives with their peers had intentionality where they made sense of their own world and participated fully in their social worlds on their own terms. Their experiences were shaped by their perceptions, emotions, and interests, and the opportunities afforded to them.

The autistic children's active and agentic social engagement with their peers was made apparent through my extensive observation and engagement with the children as the researcher, where they actively engaged in the research process to express what aspects of their experiences were important to them. Children have the right to have their voices heard and engage in areas that affect their lives (UNCRC, 1989) which includes involving them in active partnership with the researcher during the research process (Lundy et al., 2011). In this study, an ethnographic methodology grounded in a rights-informed approach was used to explore the children's social experiences, where the children's voices and views were foregrounded and interwoven into the conceptualisation of the methodology and data collection. The stories and experiences that were child-led and respected by the researcher, enabled the 'essence' of the children's experiences to emerge. This study shows that:

(i) Social experiences are an inherent part of autistic children's sense of themselves, and of their inclusion in schools. Conceptualisations of autistic children's social experiences need to consider the dynamic nature of classroom and school-based social inclusion and exclusion experiences.

(ii) Autistic children can, and do, make sense of the social world around them in meaningful ways. They actively create and influence their own and others' social spaces collaboratively with their peers.

(iii) Autistic children's voices have a role in ensuring that their experiences and identities are equitably represented in research. An exploration and

presentation of the children's experiences became integral for the children, through their active involvement as co-researchers in this study.

7.1 Autistic Children's Social Experiences

As highlighted in the discussion chapter (Chapter 6), this research conceptualises autistic children's social experiences in terms of their friendships which were experienced and valued in multidimensional ways, their meaningful and creative engagement in play, independently and with others, and their self-determined interactions with their peers. The novel and resourceful manner in which the autistic children interpreted and engaged in play and other interactions, situated them, at times, in central and influential roles within the peer groups. Embedded in these contexts of play and interactions, the autistic children and their peers collaborated, negotiated, and learned from and with each other. The autistic children played an important role in initiating and sustaining social and learning spaces, thus meaningfully contributing to the social culture in the classroom.

Autistic children's active role in co-creating, and making sense of, social experiences with their peers shows that their participation in the social culture of the classroom was not arbitrary. Through an understanding of the inherent social dynamics of the classrooms, the autistic children developed perceptions about themselves as well as how they were viewed by their peers. They knew why they were excluded or could surmise the individual traits that prevented their friends from including them more. They also demonstrated and acted on understandings regarding their own, and others, emotions and showed how these insights steered their decisions regarding their social engagement. Extending the view of children "as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives" (Prout & James, 2015, p. 7), this study portrayed another critical dimension of these children's social experiences that is underscored by their capable social understanding and agency.

This study showed that social exclusionary experiences for autistic children can exist within the boundaries of inclusion and inclusive experiences and vice-versa, and this is an important consideration when conceptualising the social experiences of autistic children. While there is clear evidence that autistic children face social exclusion in terms of peer rejection, difficulties in friendships, and bullying (Mamas et al., 2021), other studies have also shown positive peer experiences, particularly among young autistic children (Cunningham, 2022).

Extending these findings, the current study highlights that the experiences of social inclusion and exclusion, facilitated by friendships, play, and peer interactions, can be viewed beyond a binary understanding of solely inclusion or exclusion; social inclusion and exclusion are an interrelated phenomenon. It was possible for an autistic child in this study to be socially included in some contexts but excluded in others. Importantly, the experiences of social inclusion and exclusion could also unfold within similar contexts and the same friendship groups, on the same day or across different days. For example, the autistic children in this study experienced active social inclusion within friendship groups but were also rejected from play with the same friendship group in another context. Further, autistic children's experiences of social inclusion or exclusion informed their self-perceptions and views of others, consequently influencing their decisions regarding future social actions and perpetuating a cycle of inclusion or exclusion. However, as this study showed, perceptions and social actions can and do change, through mediating factors such as common interests. In this way, experiences of social inclusion and exclusion are a dynamic construct. A relational understanding of social inclusion and social exclusion indicates that visible inclusion does not inevitably imply an absence of exclusion nor does it guarantee consistent and stable social inclusion. Similarly, experiences of exclusion do not negate or undermine social inclusion in other contexts. Therefore, a binary understanding of social inclusion and social exclusion has the potential to be reductionist and may not adequately capture the layers of complexity in the children's social experiences.

Moreover, this study also builds on findings from past research that social experiences with peers are valued components of autistic children's inclusive experiences. As Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018) argue, inclusion needs to be viewed holistically, and must not be limited to inclusion in the formal learning processes. This is further supported by autistic young people's views that being accepted and participating in peer groups is critical to inclusion (Lüddeckens, 2021). Facilitating positive social experiences as a necessary and inherent part of inclusion in school for autistic children is crucial, along with recognising that these children can experience both social inclusion and exclusion to varying degrees, influenced by contextual and personal factors.

The value of authentic play is another variable that serves as a catalyst to facilitate the social inclusion of autistic children, in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them. As highlighted in the literature review chapter (Chapter 2), autistic children's play has often been discussed through the lens of interventions and adult views of what play is, and less attention

has been paid to autistic children's play in its own right, or of their conceptions of play. In the current study, the findings showed that unstructured naturalistic play, in itself, becomes a context for the social inclusion and participation of autistic children through their agency and influence. Therefore, even though play-based interventions in educational contexts have benefits and have been shown to support and facilitate autistic children's social communication and development (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2023), it is important not to underestimate the authentic play that is child-initiated and led. Given that the autistic children's role in the play cultures extended beyond that of their immediate friendship group, play was an important context for socialisation and inclusion experiences.

Autistic children engage with the social world around them in *numerous and different* ways, and any conceptualisation of their social experiences must reflect this. There is evidence that autistic children's friendship experiences may be qualitatively different from that of their peers (Calder et al., 2013). As this study showed, friendships and peer interactions can be experienced in diverse ways, and even though the friendship experiences may be transient or tenuous, they are an essential part of the children's feelings of being socially included. Similarly, play may also be valued and experienced differently. Autistic children value solitary play experiences, but this does not imply that the children prefer being alone at all times. Indeed, these private moments of play for these children which were self-initiated and sustained, were an important source of enjoyment and observable happiness for them. Nevertheless, engagement in social play with peers, on their own terms, is also just as valued and important for autistic children. This is corroborated by the evidence from autistic adults, reflecting on their current and childhood play experiences, where they have highlighted how solitary play functioned as an important recuperative activity and sustained a 'flow' state of mind; they also enjoyed social play, which was construed by them in diverse ways, at other times (Pritchard-Rowe et al., 2023).

Finally, this study shows that autistic children's social experiences must be considered in context, as distinct from normative and generalised understandings of children's social experiences that tend to frame autistic children's socialisation experiences in the context of deficits. While very real challenges do continue to be inherent in their schooling experiences as several other researchers have highlighted (e.g., Cresswell et al., 2019; Goodall, 2018; Schroeder et al., 2014) and the need for non-stigmatising support to address social, cognitive or language difficulties is uncontested (Happé & Frith, 2020), recognising the spectrum of

autistic children's experiences, including challenges and strengths, is also essential for informing both research and practice. As Pellicano and den Houting (2022) argue, autistic experiences have been mainly interpreted from a medicalised deficit viewpoint where the experiences are positioned in relation to 'normal' or typical development, leading to stigma and associated negative challenges for autistic people. However, as this study showed, the 'deficits' can also be interpreted through another lens where the children's agency and understanding of the social world are prioritised. When educators, parents, or professionals, involved in autistic children's lives engage with children's worlds with genuine interest, it can reveal subtleties in their unique experiences which may not be apparent otherwise.

7.2 Autistic Children's Voice(s) and Influence

Autistic children's voices have an important role in ensuring a more equitable representation of their identities and diverse social experiences. Positioning autistic children as capable of shifting narratives around autistic experiences is important to pave the way to move beyond singular narratives of their experiences. Given that medicalised views have dominated autism discourses, being misperceived by non-autistic individuals and defined using ableist language focusing on deficits, has an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of autistic individuals (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2021). This prompts the need to prioritise an equitable representation of their experiences characterised by its diversity, through debunking myths about their social motivation and engagement.

This study was fundamentally rights-informed and corroborates the view of ethnography and participatory research methods as valuable approaches to explore children's experiences (Barley & Russell, 2019; Ellis, 2017), and to support children's participation as competent rights-holders (Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2015; Tickle, 2017). In this study, an ethnographic and participatory approach provided the context to support the autistic children to directly contribute to the research in *their own* time and space, and over time. Utilising methods adaptably and supporting the children's choice to engage with the research in ways that aligned with their predilections also contributed to their sense of enjoyment in the research process. Additionally, ethnographic engagement with the children in their world revealed new dimensions in their experiences which may be inadvertently overlooked by interviews or short-term observations alone. Ethnographic approaches in the classroom that enable us to 'stop,

watch, listen, and engage' is an important step in affording children their right to have a voice and to change the narrative around the capabilities of autistic children in the classroom.

For future research, this study has shown that autistic children can competently construct and interpret their role as participants in the research process. Children were involved as co-researchers primarily during the data collection process and were not involved from the outset. Even so, the children's ability to meaningfully influence and co-create knowledge with the researcher enhanced and contributed new knowledge to the understanding of autistic children's experiences in social inclusion. To support autistic children's capacity as co-researchers, at any stage in the research process, an appropriate flexible and responsive methodology must be founded on a rights-informed approach. This means that their right to have a say on matters that are important to them along with other Articles outlined in the UNRCR (1989) are inherently recognised and upheld, specifically: (i) non-discrimination (Article 2), (ii) best interests of the child (Article 3), and (iii) respect for the views of the child (Article 12).

7.3 Limitations and Future Directions

The findings from this study reflect the experiences of two autistic children, and learning from more children and their unique experiences is important. Although the intent is not to generalise these findings to other settings, and cannot be taken as a representation of other children's experiences, these findings do provide grounds to initiate conversations around rethinking existing conceptualisations about autistic children's self-directed social capabilities. Positive social experiences, having friendships, and being included is just as important for autistic children, as is shown in this study. This prompts the need for more research to understand the sophisticated social experiences of autistic children in their school.

The two male participants in this study were verbally proficient, and while this criterion was not specifically sought out while recruiting participants, school and contextual circumstances meant that these two children were the ones who met the inclusion criteria. Given that there is an underrepresentation of autistic girls, and autistic children who are not verbally or cognitively proficient in the published research, it is acknowledged that this is a limitation of this study. Further efforts to ensure that autistic voices and perspectives in research reflect the heterogeneity of the population are important.

Within the primary methodology of ethnography, this study utilised participatory approaches during data collection, even though the children were not involved in identifying the research questions, or in the analysis of findings. In this study, the participatory approach was viewed as a continuum and I was motivated to engage the children in the research process to the greatest extent possible within the time constraints of my doctoral study. This meant that the participants could not be engaged in the final analysis of the data. However, the iterative nature of coding and writing memos during data collection enabled me to check the emerging ideas with the participants of the study which guided the analysis process. An exploration of how autistic children's involvement across all stages of the research process within an ethnographic methodology can be supported could be a consideration for future research.

In this study, the autistic children's motivation and self-determination to learn and play, influenced how they approached and navigated their social interactions and engagement with peers. The preliminary findings indicate that an exploration of these children's motivation can provide valuable insights into their social experiences and is thus warranted. Future studies could explore this to develop a strength-based conceptualisation of the role played by these children's motivation in how they navigate their social world.

7.4 Summary

The view of autistic children as competent and capable in their actions at school, and in how they purposefully make sense of the social world in the classroom contributes to the emerging strength-based narratives around the experiences of autistic children (Burke & Claughton, 2019; Rice-Adams, 2022). This supports the calls for a paradigm shift in how the experiences of autistic children and individuals are conceptualised and narrated (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). The findings of this study extend some existing research around the social experiences and inclusion of children with disabilities, including autism (Edwards et al., 2021; Koster et al., 2009; Mamas et al., 2021), by emphasising the central role played by the children themselves in navigating the different aspects of their social experiences.

The strength-based and rights-based conceptualisation of autistic children presented in this study invites a reconsideration of some deficit discourses around autistic children's social experiences. Presently, findings and narratives that autistic children have reduced social motivation, face difficulties in making friends or experience lower quality friendships (Chang

et al., 2019; Chevallier et al., 2012; Kasari et al., 2011), and are deficient in play (Baron-Cohen, 1987; González-Sala et al., 2021), are prevalent in literature. This study showed the diverse social experiences of the children that built on their capabilities and shed light on other dimensions of their experiences that are not framed by deficits alone.

The study contributes to the understanding of some underexplored aspects of autistic children's social experiences. Without a strong body of evidence on autistic children's experiences, including primary-aged children, particularly within a rights-informed approach (Fayette & Bond, 2018; Horgan et al., 2023), autistic children need their voice heard more than ever to ensure a comprehensive understanding of their social experiences. This study is part of the contribution to ensure that autistic children have some influence and audience to their views. By foregrounding the voices of two autistic primary-aged boys, it contributes to the developing literature around autistic children's social experiences within New Zealand and internationally. Further, autistic children's experience of play in naturalistic settings is an area that requires further exploration. In addition to the narratives of the children's friendships and interactions, this study also furthers the understanding of the rich and imaginative play cultures of autistic children, and how they interact and connect with peers through play.

A lack of participant involvement in methodological considerations in educational studies involving autistic children has also been identified in the literature (Zanuttini, 2023). This current study addressed this in two ways: (i) the Children's Research Advisory Group was consulted to advise on some of the research techniques and resources used with the children, and (ii) the two autistic participants themselves were supported to guide the data collection process. Methods including interview and observational techniques were adapted and modified to ensure that the boys' preferences and interests were incorporated and followed through. The findings of this study thus contribute to the literature on how autistic children's participation in methodological consideration in research can be emphasised and supported.

Finally, a note from the children themselves. The fieldnote below was made during the children's last week of the school year, as observed in James' class. This snapshot of a typical social activity in the classroom represents the children's competent discernment and insight into the social world around them:

It was morning break in the classroom and the children were seated on the mat with their snacks. A 'class reporter' session was taking place, part of a pattern where each week a different student would bring something of interest to them and talk about it in front of their class. James was sitting on the mat with the rest of his peers facing his teacher and a large whiteboard. The class reporter, a new girl who had joined the class, had brought a doll. The girl appeared shy and stood behind the whiteboard, reluctant to stand in front of her class. The children wait quietly. The teacher encourages her, and James stands up and says to the girl loudly, "Come on!! You've got this… you can do this!" He provides verbal encouragement to the girl. Some other children clap and show their support. She then proceeds to share the significance of the doll with the rest of the class as James raises both his hands in a thumbs-up sign and others clap.

The children's social experiences through friendships, play, and interactions, observed throughout my time with them as a researcher, encapsulated the agency that autistic children bring to the social environment within a classroom, their ability to relate and connect with their peers, and influence the social dynamics of the classroom. As Paley (2000) noted long ago, "the children have much to teach us if we but stop and listen" (p. 136). Twenty-three years later, this is relevant more than ever.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Examples of the Data Analysis Process

Analytic steps

Stage	Procedure	Data	Mode
1	First cycle coding Memos	Fieldnotes Interview transcripts	Manual
2	Second cycle coding (patterns) Memos	First cycle codes Fieldnotes Interview transcripts	Manual
3	Developing a flexible coding framework	Second cycle codes	NVivo Manual
4	The third round of coding facilitated by constant comparative method	Second cycle codes Fieldnotes Memos	NVivo Manual
5	Development of findings and interpretation	Third cycle codes Memos Literature review	NVivo Manual

The First Round of Codes

Harry	James
Reactions to Me Solo play Pretend play Picking on Lego No friends Incongruencies in perception of friendship My position Preferring my company Engaging in play with other children Harry's rules	Outdoor school activity (out of school) Classroom games (facilitated Mat time Class/ task participation Peers interactions with James Interactions with me Teacher comments – James' behaviour Lego club Class work Change in behaviour. Breaktime activity - solo play

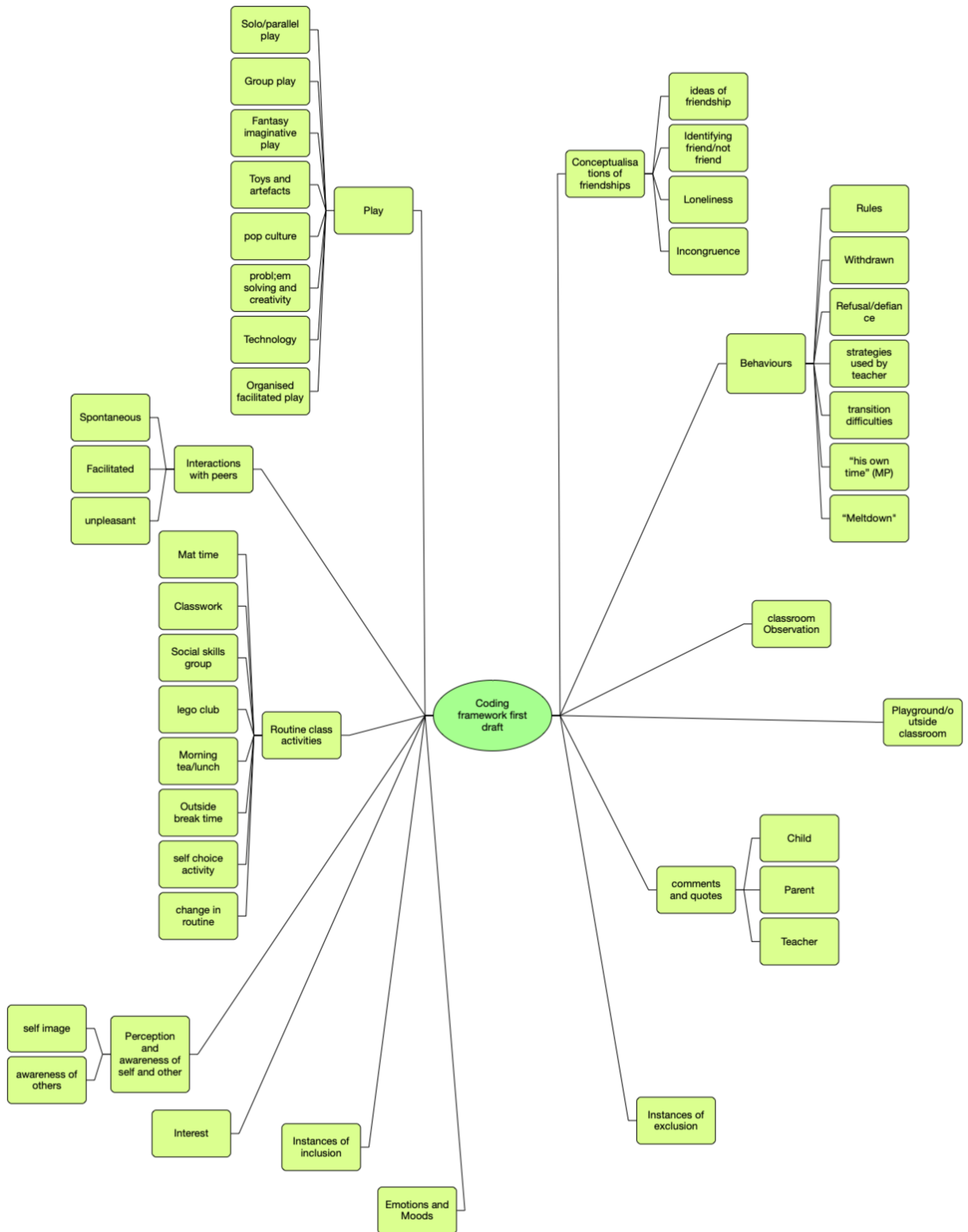
Mat time Position during classwork Harry’s comments - personal preferences Teacher's comments Fantasy/Imaginative Play Attachment Harry’s behaviours Description of friend/not friend Harry comments about others -spontaneous Harry beh-withdrawn My position- unsure of what to do Harry beh - defiance/refusal Systems in place -Harry beh Emotions Technology Friendships – comments by Harry Comments by teacher Technology/Minecraft Reference to bullying by Harry (ie., not observed) Social skills group Change in routine Playing by himself Parallel play - solo Playing with other /group play Blurring of researcher boundary Mat time behaviours Participation in class activity/class work Interaction with peers- offer to help Peers interaction with Harry Toys and artifacts Position within group Lockdown Self choice activity Emotion & mood His own time Facilitated interaction Facilitated interactions by artefacts Family background Pop culture Playground observations Interests Shifts in interests Problem solving /creativity Emotions - consideration for others / Sharing Ideas of what is friendships Spontaneous interactions with peers Unpleasant interactions with peers Comments about school	“Sitting by himself” Not able is find people to pair up with Exclusion James’ comment- aloneness Teacher’s comments - struggles No friends to play with: Attachment James’ interaction with peers – facilitated Class room games Self perceptions - Comment Games not accommodated for James Interaction with peers- words of encouragement Awareness of other Not active exclusion - overlooked Sitting alone Desire to play with others Self awareness Problem solving Group play Solo play Perceptions about friends Engagement with technology/Minecraft Behaviour- withdrawing On the periphery of peer group - looking in James’ behaviour – systems in place Teacher’s comments: “attention seeking behavior” Withdrawn / refusal Parallel play Incongruencies in description about friends Class work - on task Willingness to play with others Pop culture Self perception - Comments Teachers comments- Social interactions Minecraft boredom Self perceptions – feeling proud Artefacts- self made creations Instances of inclusion Play with sibling Peer's interactions with James’ artifact- Problem solving, creativity Interactions during class activity Joint ownership of artifact “Quitting” Refusal/defiance Anger – relationship with researcher My position Shift in perception of me

Response to bullying, Mother's comments: Interest / background Transition-difficulties	Emotions & moods Social interaction's during class work Peer offering help: accommodating Working 'own' w/i group Facilitated interactions Parallel play Incongruencies Friends Imaginative group play Artefact Change in routine Peers interaction with James Feeling left out One -on- one interaction-helpful Mother's comments: perceptions of friends exclusion being alone stigma alternative approach not typical autistic feature bullying meltdown at school family background self awareness empathy

Examples from the Second Round of Coding

Harry	James
Play - Solo play - Parallel play - Group play (with one other or multiple) - Fantasy / Imaginative play - Toys & artifacts - Pop culture - Problem solving and creativity - Technology **Interactions with peers** - Interactions during class activity (facilitated) - Spontaneous interaction - Facilitated interaction (e.g., social skills - Or when TA says Why don't you ask / play with-?) - Unpleasant interaction (e.g., bullying) **Routine class tasks** - Mat time - Social skills group - Literacy/numeracy - Positions during classwork - Self-choice activity - Breaktime - Morning tea/lunch - Changes in routine **Emotions and Moods** **Conceptualisations/descriptions of Friendships** - Ideas of Friendship - Identifying friend/not a friend - Incongruencies **Outward behaviours** - Rules - Withdrawn - Refusal/defiance - Startegies used by teacher to manage - "his own time" - Transition difficulties **Interests**	**Play** - Solo play - Group play (including siblings) - Participation in organised games in class - Artifacts and self-made creations - Pop culture and Minecraft - Lego club **Interactions with peers** - Spontaneous interactions - Facilitated interactions (Lego club, classroom games) **Conceptualisations and Descriptions of friendship** - Loneliness - Identifying friends - Incongruencies **Instances of exclusion or isolation** **Instances of inclusion** **Emotions and Moods** **Routine class tasks** - Mat time - Classwork (i.e. reading/writing) - Lego club - Morning tea/lunch - Breaktime **Outward behaviours** - Seeking attention - Withdrawn - Refusal/defiance - Anger - Excitement and happiness - "meltdown"

Preliminary Draft of Coding Framework in NVivo



Draft List of NVivo Codes

Context of Observations
Breaktime observations
Classroom observations
Change in routines and unusual events
Playground observations
Positions in the classroom and PG
Coping Strategies
Counter examples in observation
Descriptions of school related things
Emotions and Moods
Outbursts
Friendships
Description of friends and peers
Desire for friendship/companionship
Loneliness and aloneness
Hobbies and Interests
Instances of exclusion
Instances of inclusion
Interactions with peers
Conflicts and resolutions
Desire to be alone
Facilitated interactions
Non-interactions
Peer initiated interaction
Spontaneous interactions
Unpleasant interactions
Methodology and methods
Collecting data
Ethics
Perceptions and awareness
Other's perceptions of participants
Perceptions of others
Perceptions of self
Play
Character role play
Organised games
Play with others
Solo or Parallel
Quotes and Comments
Comments by mother
Comments by peers (in context of observation of main participants)
Comments by teachers
James
Harry
Researcher's position

Example of Development of Findings and Themes

(In conjunction with memos)

<u>Harry's social experiences</u>

Key findings	**Guiding codes**
Agency and negotiation in play	Character role play Organised games Play with others Solo or Parallel Hobbies and Interests Conflicts and resolution Desire for friendship/companionship
Dynamic Perceptions of friendships	Description of friends and peers Desire for friendship companionship Loneliness and aloneness (or lack of) Hobbies and interests Peer-initiated interactions Perceptions of others Conflicts and resolution Instances of exclusion Desire to be alone
Socialising through different identities	Character role play Play with others Spontaneous interactions Peer initiated interaction Instances of inclusion
Making connections	Spontaneous interactions Peer initiated interactions Hobbies and interests Play with others Instances of inclusion Desire for friendship/companionship

James' social experiences

Key findings	**Guiding codes**
The many facets of friendships	Description of friends and peers Desire for friendship companionship Loneliness and aloneness (or lack of) Conflicts and resolutions Hobbies and interests perceptions of others
Collaboration and ownership in play	Play with others Organised games Facilitated interactions Spontaneous interactions Solo/parallel play
Spaces of imagination	Play with others Hobbies and interests Spontaneous interactions
Emotional insights	Emotions and moods Coping strategies Loneliness and aloneness Instances of inclusion Instances of exclusion Unpleasant interactions
Everyday interactions within the classroom	Conflicts and resolution Perceptions of self Coping strategies Facilitated interactions Spontaneous interactions

Overarching Themes (Discussion)

Overarching themes	Experiences
Friendships as multidimensional	Dynamic perceptions of friendships (Harry) Making connections (Harry) The many facets of friendships (James) Emotional insight (James)
Play as meaningful to the children	Agency and Negotiation in Play (Harry) Making connections (Harry) Collaboration and Ownership in Play (James) Spaces of imagination (James)
Children interacting intentionally and purposefully	Socialising through different identities (Harry) Making connections (Harry) Everyday interactions in the classroom (James) Emotional insights (James)

Appendix B: Invitation Letter and Information Sheet for Schools

The Principal and Board of Trustees

Kia Ora,

My name is Vani Narayanan. I am undertaking PhD research through the Institute of Education at Massey University under the supervision of Prof Roseanna Bourke and Dr Vijaya Dharan.

Prior to my PhD studies, I have taught autistic children in a specialised unit overseas and also have experience working as a teacher aide in New Zealand schools. I have full New Zealand Police clearance to work in schools.

I would like to invite your school to participate in this research that will take place over the 2021 academic year. An information sheet about the research is attached. It explains how the research will be conducted. A similar information sheet will also be provided for the children, teachers and parents.

My area of research is in autism and in helping children express their ideas around their experiences. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the social experiences of autistic children in their classrooms by actively including their voices in the study. Often these children face significant challenges with peer relationships. This is why it is important to understand how to increase their chances of forming positive peer relationships.

I would like to invite between 2–4 autistic children from your school to participate in this study.

I thank you for taking the time to consider my request. Please do not hesitate to contact either myself or my supervisors if you have any questions.

Yours sincerely,

Vani Narayanan

Contact Information

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INFORMATION SHEET FOR PRINCIPAL/ BOT

Project Description

This research aims to investigate the social experiences of autistic children in their classrooms by actively including their voices in the study. The social inclusion of autistic children is pertinent for successful inclusion in schools. Research shows that despite expressing the desire to participate in social relationships at school, they face significant challenges with peer relationships. Listening to these children's voices is imperative to ensure that their lived experiences of social relationships are understood through naturally occurring daily actions and interactions in the classroom.

Participant Identification and Recruitment

I would like to work with 2–4 autistic children aged 9–13 years who attend school regularly. To recruit participants, I will request the school to send the information sheet and consent forms prepared by the researcher to parents/caregivers of potential participants. If the parent/caregiver indicates consent, I will work with the parent and the teacher/s to develop a child-friendly information sheet and consent form for each of the participants. Only those children who have indicated consent in addition to having parental/ caregiver consent will be recruited for this study.

Project Procedures – What will happen if the school chooses to take part?

Over the next academic year, I would like to spend 2 days per week at your school. The research will involve:

1. Observations of the participating children as they interact with their peers in the school.
2. Informal conversations with the participating children as they engage in their daily activities.
3. An art- based activity and an interview with the participating children that will last no more than 1 hour.
4. Informal conversations with the teachers of the participating children
5. Informal conversations with the parents/caregiver.

Due care will be taken to ensure that disruptions are minimised, and the needs of the staff and pupils are prioritised.

Data Management

During my observations and interviews, I will be taking notes. The interview with the participant after the art-activity will be audio recorded with their permission.

The identities of the participants, the staff members and the school will be kept confidential and only pseudonyms will be used. The data collected will be stored in a locked cabinet or a password protected laptop. Only myself and my supervisors will have access to the data. The data will be analysed and written up as part of my thesis and other relevant journal publications or presentations.

A summary of findings will be made available to you by email after the completion and examination of my thesis (February 2023). The data that I have collected will be destroyed after 7 years.

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Participant's Rights

Your school is under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your school's name will not be used;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

The children, parents and teachers are also under no obligation to accept this invitation. If they decide to participate, they have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from this study at any time before the end of data collection. Only information collected up until the point they choose to withdraw will be used with their permission and these will be anonymised;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that their name will not be used;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

Please do not hesitate to contact myself or my supervisors if you have any questions.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 20/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz .

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Appendix C: Information Sheet and Consent Form for Teachers/Teacher-aides

INFORMATION SHEET FOR CLASSROOM TEACHER/S AND TEACHER AIDES

Kia ora,

My name is Vani Narayanan. I am undertaking PhD research through the Institute of Education at Massey University under the supervision of Prof Roseanna Bourke and Dr Vijaya Dharan. Prior to my PhD studies, I have taught autistic children in a specialised unit overseas and also have experience working as a teacher aide in New Zealand schools. I have full New Zealand police clearance to work in schools.

Project Description and Invitation

The school committee has given me permission to invite autistic children in your classroom to be a part of my study. I would like to request an opportunity to be a part of your classroom and to invite you to consider participating in this research.

This research will investigate the social experiences of autistic children in their classrooms by actively including their voices in the study. The social inclusion of autistic children is pertinent for successful inclusion in schools. Research shows that despite expressing the desire to participate in social relationships at school, they face significant challenges with peer relationships. Listening to these children's voices is imperative to ensure that their lived experiences of social relationships are understood through natural occurring daily actions and interactions in the classroom.

Participant Identification and Recruitment

If you are agreeable, I will request a time with you to start recruitment of participants and begin data collection. Information sheets and consent forms prepared by the researcher will have to be send home to the parents/caregivers of potential participants. Information sheets will also be given to parents of non-participating children.

If the parent/caregiver indicates consent, I will develop a child-friendly information sheet and consent form for each of the participant with the parent's and your input. Only those children who have indicated consent in addition to having parental/caregiver consent will be recruited for this study.

Project Procedures

Over the next academic year, I would like to spend 2 days per week in your classroom. The research will involve:

1. Observations of the participating children as they interact with their peers in the school.
2. Informal conversations with the participating children as they engage in their daily activities.
3. An art-based activity and an interview with the participating children that will last no more than 1 hour. This will be audio recorded with their permission.
4. Informal conversations with the teachers of the participating children.
5. Informal conversations with the parents/caregiver.

Due care will be taken to ensure that disruptions are minimised, and the needs of the staff and pupils are prioritised.

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What will the teacher/teacher-aide have to do?

I will be conducting observations of the participating children in your classroom. I will ask you some questions about the participants. This is not a formal interview; I may ask you some questions and note down your responses to my questions while I undertake my observations to gain contextual information and a deeper understanding of the participants. I may also require your assistance in implementing an art activity. This should take no more than 1 hour.

I will also be taking notes during observations. Teachers will not be directly observed or recorded in my notes; however, you may feature in my notes anonymously through your association with the participating students.

Data Management

The identities of the participants, the staff members and the school will be kept confidential and only pseudonyms will be used. The data collected will be stored in a locked cabinet or a password protected laptop. Only myself and my supervisors will have access to the data. The data will be analysed and written up as part of my thesis or other relevant journal publications or presentations.

A summary of the findings will be made available to the principal and Board of Trustees after the completion and examination of my thesis (February 2023). The data that I have collected will be destroyed after 7 years.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- withdraw yourself from the study at any time before the end of data collection (to be discussed); observations will continue in the classroom and only information collected up until the point you choose to withdraw will be used with your permission and these will be anonymised;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

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Project Contacts

Please do not hesitate to contact either myself or my supervisors if you have any questions.

Researcher:

Vani Narayanan

vani.narayanan.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Supervisors:

Prof Roseanna Bourke

R.Bourke@massey.ac.nz

Dr Vijaya Dharan

V.M.Dharan@massey.ac.nz

Thank you for taking the time to consider your participation in the study. If you agree, kindly return the attached consent form within 7 days.

Ngā mihi nui

Vani Narayanan

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 20/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz .

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Teacher/Teacher Aide Consent Form

I have read the information sheet carefully and/or have had the details of the study explained to me. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider my participation in this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection period.

Please circle as appropriate.

8.	I am willing to be a part of this study.	Yes	No
9.	I agree for observations of the participants to be made in my classroom.	Yes	No
10.	I agree for the use of anonymised fieldnotes which may contain references to me to be used in the research reports.	Yes	No

Declaration by teacher/teacher aide:

I ___________________________________ [print full name] hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: ______________________ **Date:** _______________

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Appendix D: Information Sheet and Consent Form for Parents/Caregivers

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENT/CAREGIVER

Kia ora,

My name is Vani Narayanan. I am undertaking PhD research through the Institute of Education at Massey University under the supervision of Prof Roseanna Bourke and Dr Vijaya Dharan. Prior to my PhD studies, I have taught autistic children in a specialised unit overseas and also have experience working as a teacher aide in New Zealand schools. I have full New Zealand police clearance to work in schools.

Project Description and Invitation

The school committee has given me permission to invite autistic children and their parents/caregivers to take part in this study. The participants in this study will be 2-4 autistic children.

I would like to invite you and your child to be a part of this research.

This study will investigate the social experiences of autistic children in their school by actively including their voices in research. The social inclusion of autistic children is pertinent for successful inclusion in schools. Research shows that despite expressing the desire to participate in social relationships at school, they face significant challenges with peer relationships. Listening to these children's voices is imperative to ensure that their lived experiences of social relationships are understood through naturally occurring daily actions and interactions in the classroom.

What will taking part in this study involve for you and your child?

Over the next academic year, I will spend 2 days per week in the school. If you volunteer to take part in this study, I will contact you to set up a meeting to introduce myself and talk about the study. I will also develop a child-friendly information sheet and consent form for your child with your and your child's teacher's input. Once this has been developed, your child can go over the information with your support and indicate their consent if they wish to take part. This research will involve:

1. Observations of the participating children as they interact with their peers in the school.
2. Informal conversations with the participating children as they engage in their daily activities.
3. An art- based activity and an interview with the participating children that will last no more than 1 hour. This interview will be audio recorded and the material produced by your child photographed. Your child can choose to have you or their teacher present.
4. Informal conversations with the teachers of the participating children.
5. Informal conversations with the parents/caregiver.
6. An observation at home, if you choose.

Activities and interviews will be adapted to suit your child's preferred mode of communication.

Due care will be taken to ensure that disruptions are minimised, and the needs of the staff and pupils are prioritised.

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Are there any risks involved?

I will strive to make this research as enjoyable for your child as possible. In the case that your child becomes uncomfortable or distressed, I will immediately stop collecting data and will only resume once your child has indicated that he/she is ok to continue. I will also inform his/her teacher. Your child will be reminded that his/her participation is completely optional.

Will participating in this study benefit my child?

It is anticipated that this research will generate new knowledge about the social experiences of autistic children in inclusive classrooms. The findings can be used to benefit both children at the school and further afield.

Data Management

During my observations, I will be taking notes. The interview with the participant after the art-activity will be audio recorded.

The identities of the participants, parents, the staff members and the school will be kept confidential and only pseudonyms will be used. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet or password protected laptop.

Only myself and my supervisors will have access to the data. The data will be analysed and written up as part of my thesis and other relevant journal publications or presentations.

A summary of the findings will be made available to you by email after the completion and examination of my thesis (February 2023). Please indicate in the consent form if you would like a summary of the findings. The data that I have collected will be destroyed after 7 years.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. Declining to participate will not affect your child's school life in any way. If you agree for you and your child to participate, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw yourself and your child from this study at any time before the end of data collection (to be discussed). Only information collected up until the point you choose to withdraw will be used with your permission and these will be anonymised;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that yours and your child's name will not be used;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

Your child is also under no obligation to participate in this study. He/she will be informed that his/her participation is optional.

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Project Contacts

Please do not hesitate to contact either myself or my supervisors if you have any questions.

Researcher:

Vani Narayanan

vani.narayanan.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Supervisors:

Prof Roseanna Bourke

R.Bourke@massey.ac.nz

Dr Vijaya Dharan

V.M.Dharan@massey.ac.nz

Thank you for taking the time to consider your and your child's participation in this study. If you are agreeable, kindly return the attached consent form to the classroom teacher within 7 days.

Ngā mihi nui

Vani Narayanan

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 20/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz .

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Parent Consent Form

I have read the information sheet carefully and/or have had the details of the study explained to me. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider my and my child's participation in this study. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my child from the study at any time during the data collection period.

Please circle as appropriate.

1.	I agree to my and my child's participation in this study under the conditions set out in the information sheet.	Yes	No
2.	I agree to have my child observed by the researcher in his/her classroom.	Yes	No
3.	I agree to have my child observed at home for a day if I choose.	Yes	No
4.	I agree for my child's interview to be audio recorded.	Yes	No
5.	I agree for the material produced by my child during the art activity to be photographed.	Yes	No
6.	I agree for the use of anonymised fieldnotes which may contain references to me and my child to be used in the research reports.	Yes	No
7.	I would like to receive a summary of the findings.	Yes	No

Declaration by Parent/Caregiver:

I ___________________________________ [print full name] hereby consent for myself and my child

____________________[print full name of child] to take part in this study.

Signature: ______________________ Date: _______________

Contact details: _________________________

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Appendix E: Invitation Letter and Information Sheet for Schools – CRAG

The Principal and Board of Trustees

[redacted]

[redacted]

Kia Ora,

My name is Vani Narayanan. I am undertaking PhD research through the Institute of Education at Massey University under the supervision of Prof Roseanna Bourke and Dr Vijaya Dharan. Prior to my PhD studies, I have taught autistic children in a specialised unit overseas and also have experience working as a teacher aide in New Zealand schools. I have full New Zealand Police clearance to work in schools.

As you may recall, I had extended an invitation to your school to be a part of my research. I thank you for considering my request and agreeing to participate.

My area of research is in autism and in helping children express their ideas around their experiences. As part of my study, I also plan to have 4–6 children participate in a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG). The CRAG will be an inclusive group of children, including up to 3 autistic children.

I would like to invite children from your school to participate in the CRAG. This group will be different from the main participants of the study.

An information sheet about the research is attached. It explains how the research will be conducted. A similar information sheet will also be provided for the children, teachers and parents.

I thank you for taking the time to consider my request. Please do not hesitate to contact either myself or my supervisors if you have any questions.

Yours sincerely,

Vani Narayanan

Contact Information

Researcher:

Vani Narayanan
[redacted]
vani.narayanan.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Supervisors:

Prof Roseanna Bourke
R.Bourke@massey.ac.nz

Dr Vijaya Dharan
V.M.Dharan@massey.ac.nz

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INFORMATION SHEET FOR PRINCIPAL/ BOT

CHILDREN'S RESEARCH ADVISORY GROUP (CRAG)

Project Description

My PhD research will investigate the social experiences of autistic children in their classrooms. The main participants for this study have been recruited.

As part of my study, I plan to have 4–6 children aged 9–13 participate in a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG). This group will provide valuable inputs on the research topic and some methods that can be used to facilitate effective participation of their peers. The CRAG will be an inclusive group of children, including up to 3 autistic children.

Who can take part?

I want to identify 4–6 children, including 2–3 autistic children. Being a part of this CRAG will require children to think about and discuss their social experiences at school. The children will take part in a small art-based activity and I will also ask for their input on the activity. The materials made by the children during the art activity will be photographed but the children will not be photographed.

What will happen if the school agrees to be a part of the project?

With the classroom teacher's assistance, I will send information sheets and consent forms to parents of the potential participants. If the parent/caregiver indicates consent, I will develop a child-friendly information sheet and consent form for each of the participants. Only those children who have indicated consent in addition to having parental/ caregiver consent will be recruited for this study.

I will then contact the classroom teacher/s to set up a time to meet with the children that ensures minimum disruption.

The conversation that I have with the children will not be recorded. However, I will be taking down notes. The art activity and the discussion will last for no more than 1 hour.

Data Management

The identities of the participants, the staff members and the school will be kept confidential and only pseudonyms will be used. The data collected will be stored in a locked cabinet or a password protected laptop. Only myself and my supervisors will have access to the data. The data will be analysed and written up as part of my thesis and other relevant journal publications or presentations.

A summary of the findings will be made available to you by email after the completion and examination of my thesis (February 2023). The data that I have collected will be destroyed after 7 years.

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Appendix F: Information Sheet for Teachers – CRAG

INFORMATION SHEET FOR CLASSROOM TEACHER/S AND TEACHER AIDES

CHILDREN'S RESEARCH ADVISORY GROUP (CRAG)

Kia ora,

My name is Vani Narayanan. I am undertaking PhD research through the Institute of Education at Massey University under the supervision of Prof Roseanna Bourke and Dr Vijaya Dharan. Prior to my PhD studies, I have taught autistic children in a specialised unit overseas and also have experience working as a teacher aide in New Zealand schools. I have full New Zealand Police clearance to work in schools.

Project Description and Invitation

My PhD research will investigate the social experiences of autistic children in their classrooms. The participants for this study have been recruited.

As part of my study, I plan to have 4–6 children participate in a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG). This group will provide valuable inputs on the research topic and some methods that can be used to facilitate effective participation of their peers. The CRAG will be an inclusive group of children, including up to 3 autistic children.

The principal and Board of Trustees have given permission for me to invite children from your classroom to be a part of the CRAG.

Who can take part?

I want to invite 4–6 children including 2–3 autistic children to be a part of this CRAG. Being a part of this CRAG will require children to think about and discuss their social experiences at school. The children will take part in a small art-based activity and I will also ask for their input on the activity. The materials made by the children during the art activity will be photographed but the children will not be photographed.

Project procedures

I would like to request your assistance in sending information sheets and consent forms to parents of the potential participants as well as collecting them as they are returned.

If the parent/caregiver indicates consent, I will develop a child-friendly information sheet and consent form for each of the participants. Only those children who have indicated consent in addition to having parental/ caregiver consent will be recruited for this study.

I will then set up a time with you to meet with the children at school that ensures minimum disruption. The conversation that I have with the children will not be recorded. However, I will be taking down notes. The art activity and the discussion will last for no more than 1 hour.

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Data Management

The identities of the participants, the staff members and the school will be kept confidential and only pseudonyms will be used. Only myself and my supervisors will have access to the data. The data will be analysed and written up as part of my thesis and other relevant journal publications or presentations. The data that I have collected will be destroyed after 7 years.

Project Contacts

Please do not hesitate to contact either myself or my supervisors if you have any questions.

Contact Information
Researcher:
Vani Narayanan
vani.narayanan.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Supervisors:
Prof Roseanna Bourke
R.Bourke@massey.ac.nz

Dr Vijaya Dharan
V.M.Dharan@massey.ac.nz

Thank you for taking the time to read through this information sheet. I hope you will consider providing me with some assistance in carrying out my study.

Ngā mihi nui

Vani Narayanan

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 20/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz .

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Appendix G: Information Sheet and Consent Form for Parents/Caregivers – CRAG

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INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENT/CAREGIVER

CHILDREN'S RESEARCH ADVISORY GROUP (CRAG)

Kia ora,

My name is Vani Narayanan. I am undertaking PhD research through the Institute of Education at Massey University under the supervision of Prof Roseanna Bourke and Dr Vijaya Dharan. Prior to my PhD studies, I have taught autistic children in a specialised unit overseas and also have experience working as a teacher aide in New Zealand schools. I have full New Zealand Police clearance to work in schools.

Project Description and Invitation

My PhD research will investigate the social experiences of autistic children in their classrooms. The participants for this study have been recruited.

As part of my study, I plan to have 4–6 children participate in a Children's Research Advisory Group (CRAG). This group will provide valuable inputs on the research topic and some methods that can be used to facilitate effective participation of their peers. The CRAG will be an inclusive group, consisting of both autistic children and non-autistic peers

The Board of Trustees and the classroom teacher have given permission for me to invite children to be a part of the CRAG.

What will taking part in this study involve for your child?

If you agree that your child can participate in the CRAG, I will develop a child-friendly information sheet and consent form for your child. Your child can then go over the information with your help if required and indicate their consent if they wish to take part.

Being a part of this CRAG will require children to think about and discuss their social experiences at school. The children will take part in a small art-based activity and I will also ask for their input on the activity. The materials made by the children during the art activity will be photographed, but your child will not be photographed.

After informed consent has been obtained from you and your child, I will contact the classroom teacher/s to set up a time to meet with the children during school hours that ensures minimum disruption.

The conversation that I have with the children will not be recorded. However, I will be taking down notes. The art activity and the discussion will last for no more than 1 hour.

Will participating in this study benefit my child?

It is anticipated that this research will generate new knowledge about the social experiences of autistic children in inclusive classrooms. Your child's contribution as part of the CRAG will help me to ensure that I am conducting the research in the best way possible for the main participants of this study.

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Data Management

The identities of the participants, parents, the staff members and the school will be kept completely confidential and only pseudonyms will be used. The data collected will be stored in a locked cabinet or a password protected laptop. Only myself and my supervisors will have access to the data.

The data will be analysed and written up as part of my thesis and other relevant journal publications or presentations.

A summary of the finding will be made available to the principal and the Board of Trustees after the completion and examination of my thesis (February 2023). The data that I have collected will be destroyed after 7 years.

Child's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. Declining to participate will not affect your child's school life in any way. Your child is also under no obligation to participate in this study.

If you consent for your child to participate in the study, your child will have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study any time before the CRAG meeting;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your child's name will not be used;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

Project Contacts

Please do not hesitate to contact either myself or my supervisors if you have any questions.

Researcher:

Vani Narayanan

vani.narayanan.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Supervisors:

Prof Roseanna Bourke

R.Bourke@massey.ac.nz

Dr Vijaya Dharan

V.M.Dharan@massey.ac.nz

Thank you for taking the time to consider your child's participation in this study. If you are agreeable, kindly return the attached consent form within 7 days to the classroom teacher.

Ngā mihi nui

Vani Narayanan

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 20/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz .

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Parent Consent Form – CRAG

I have read the information sheet carefully and/or have had the details of the study explained to me. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider my child's participation in this study. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my child from the study at any time before data collection.

Declaration by Parent/Caregiver:

I __________________________________ [print full name] hereby consent for my child

____________________[print full name of child] to take part in this study.

Signature: _______________________ Date: _______________

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Appendix H: Information Sheet and Consent Form for Children

Information sheet

Hello!

My name is Vani. I study at the university.

I am doing a research project. Research means finding out things

I want to find out about experiences at school. I want to know what you do, who your friends are and what you like or don't like.

What will happen?

You don't have to take part in my project, if you don't want to.

If you choose to take part, then I will be in your classroom two days a week.

I will ask you some questions about your friends and things that you enjoy.

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I will invite you to participate in an art activity.

will be with you and you can always ask her for help

I will write down some things in my notebooks.

I will record some things that you say.

Remember:

You can say NO.

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You can say STOP.

You can ask me, your mum/dad or you teacher anything about this project. Help

If you want to be a part of my project , complete the form on the other page and return it to your teacher.

If you have any questions, you can call me. My number is [redacted]

From,

Vani

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 20/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz .

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Consent Form

Read each sentence carefully and circle 'yes' or 'no'. You can ask your mum/dad or your teacher for their help. Once you have finished, you can return this form to your teacher within 7 days. If you do not want to take part, you don't have to do anything.

I am excited to take part in this project.	Yes	No
I understand that I can say stop anytime.	Yes	No
I am ok with Vani being in the classroom with me.	Yes	No
I know Vani will ask me some questions.	Yes	No
I would like to do the art activity with Vani.	Yes	No
I understand that some things I say may be recorded.	Yes	No

Name ____________________________

Date ______________________________

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 20/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz .

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Appendix I: Information Sheet and Consent Form for Children – CRAG

Children's Research Advisory Group
Information Sheet

Hello!

My name is Vani. I study at the university.

I am doing a research project. Research means finding out some things.

I want to find out about the experiences of children in their school.

I need the help of a few children to make sure that I am doing my project well. This is called a Children's Research Advisory Group or a CRAG.

Would you like to be a part of the CRAG?

Your mum/dad and your teacher has said that it is ok for you to be a part of my CRAG. But you can choose whether you want to take part or not.

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What will happen?

If you say yes, then we will have a small meeting.

I will then talk with you and some other children who have agreed to be a part of CRAG.

I will ask you some questions about your school and things that you enjoy.

We will do an art activity and I will also ask you to help me decide if some art activities are good.

I will write down some things in my notebook so that I don't forget what you have told me.

Remember!

You can say NO.

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You can say STOP.

You do not have to answer questions I ask if you don't want to.

You can also ask me, your mum/dad or you teacher anything about this project.

Help

If you want to be a part of my CRAG, complete the form on the other page and return it to your teacher.

If you have any questions, you can call me. My number is [redacted]

From,

Vani

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 20/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz .

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Children's Research Advisory Group

Consent Form

If you want to be a part of CRAG, read each sentence carefully and circle 'yes' or 'no'. You can ask your mum/dad or your teacher for their help.

Once you have finished, you can return this form to your teacher within 7 days. If you do not want to take part, you don't have to do anything.

I am excited to be a part of the CRAG.	Yes	No
I understand that I do not have to answer a question if I don't want to.	Yes	No

Name_______________

Date_________________

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 20/62. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz .

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Appendix J: Information Sheet for Parents/Caregivers (Non-Participating Children)

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENT/CAREGIVER OF NON-PARTICIPATING CHILDREN

Kia ora,

My name is Vani Narayanan. I am undertaking PhD research through the Institute of Education at Massey University under the supervision of Prof Roseanna Bourke and Dr Vijaya Dharan. Prior to my PhD studies, I have taught autistic children in a specialised unit overseas and also have experience working as a teacher aide in New Zealand schools. I have full New Zealand Police clearance to work in schools.

Project Description

This research does not include your child, and this is for your information only. The school committee and the classroom teacher has given me permission to observe participating autistic children in their classroom and school.

This research will investigate the social experiences of autistic children in their school through observations and interviews. The social inclusion of autistic children is pertinent for successful inclusion in schools. Research shows that despite expressing the desire to participate in social relationships at school, they face significant challenges with peer relationships. Listening to these children's voices is imperative to ensure that their lived experiences of social relationships are understood through naturally occurring daily actions and interactions in the classroom.

How will this affect your child?

Over the next few terms, I will spend 2–3 days per week in your child's classroom. Your child will not be directly observed in any way. During the observation of participating children, I will be taking notes. I may at times refer to your child in my notes because of his/her association with the participant. However, your child will not be identified in any way and only pseudonyms will be used.

Due care will be taken to ensure that disruptions are minimised, and the needs of the staff and pupils are prioritised.

Data Management

The identities of the participants, parents, the staff members and the school will be kept confidential and only pseudonyms will be used. Only myself and my supervisors will have access to the data.

The data will be analysed and written up as part of my thesis and other relevant journal publications or presentations.

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Project Contacts

Please do not hesitate to contact either myself or my supervisors if you have any questions.

Researcher:

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Supervisors:

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Dr Vijaya Dharan

V.M.Dharan@massey.ac.nz

Ngā mihi nui

Vani Narayanan

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