Autistic children and young people’s experiences and perceptions of their Imaginary Companions and Paracosms (imaginary worlds).

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Declaration

I, Katharine Boyle, hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.
Abstract

This thesis uses qualitative design to explore autistic children and young people’s (CYP) experiences with and perceptions of imaginary companions (ICs) and paracosms (imaginary worlds). A consultation period was held before data collection in which autistic researchers supported with the interview design and offered guidance around best practice. Interviews were held with 8 autistic participants aged 7-17: all had multiple ICs and six had paracosms. The data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and the overarching themes showed the ICs and paracosms support the CYP’s emotional regulation, provide them with a sense of control in their lives, give access to friendships and a sense of belonging, and enable the CYP to make sense of experiences and their identity as individuals growing up with additional needs. The findings are mapped to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954) and demonstrate the overall purposes served of improved wellbeing and access to self-actualisation. The findings challenge research which connects autism to an imagination deficit (ie. Ten Eycke & Muller, 2018; Craig and Baron-Cohen, 1999), as well as the Theory of Mind hypothesis (Baron-Cohen, 1995), the Social Motivation theory (Dawson et al., 2005) and the theory of Sustained Imagination (Harris, 2000). Strengths of this research include the methodological design, enabling participants to access a traditional interview, though the study is limited by a small sample size and a heterogenous sample. Future research which explores the phenomena of autistic CYP’s imaginary activities on a wider
scale yet remains person-centred and inclusive is advised, alongside using further participatory measures.
Impact Statement

This thesis presents disruptive findings which can be highly beneficial in influencing the direction of future research on the topic of autism and imagination: the findings represent a significant step forward in reconceptualising what we know about imaginative capacity in autism.

Through the autistic children and young people (CYP) evidencing engagement with imaginary companions (ICs) and paracosms (imaginary worlds), several theoretical pillars of autism research are called into question: the Theory of Mind hypothesis (Baron-Cohen, 1995), the Social Motivation theory (Dawson et al., 2005) and the more general imagination deficit narrative seen through the research base. These findings also challenge our understanding of Sustained Imagination theory in child development (Harris, 2000). This new data is incredibly rich but difficult to connect to old data, particularly with regards to paracosms, which speaks to paucity in the literature and the degree to which it is an understudied area.

This thesis also gives further weight to the revolution in autism research in terms of research aims and methodological design: Crane and Pellicano (2022) explained the power balance in autism research is beginning to shift, albeit very gradually. Whilst autism researchers have historically been accustomed to setting agendas with regards to the focus of autism research, autistic people, their family members and the professionals who support them are now
beginning to be invited to have a stake in the research that shapes autistic people's lives. By including participatory measures, adjusting interviews in line with individual needs and keeping the CYP's views and experiences central to the research, I have demonstrated recognition of my academic responsibility to disrupt harmful narratives and support empowerment rather than exacerbate ableism (Quirici, 2015). Through the findings I was then able to access, this has, in turn, demonstrated why it is important and invaluable that this continue through future research. I have made recommendations for future research in alignment with what worked well in this thesis.

Ethical risks to undertaking and sharing research which is deficit-oriented by nature include the popularisation of therapies, such as ABA (applied behavioural analysis) and CAM (complementary and alternative therapies for autism), which are widely used to reduce and erase autistic traits from individuals (Milton, 2013).

Outside of academia, the findings from this thesis can be put to beneficial use by shining a light on the meaning of these experiences and offering guidance to those supporting autistic CYP as to how to navigate incidents of the phenomena and how to best meet the needs identified as unmet in the CYP's real lives, which are met instead through their ICs and paracosms. Despite the many perceived advantages and positive purposes served, the accounts of ICs and
paracosms also give credence to the participants’ lived difficulties in their real lives, particularly the challenges many face in navigating social relationships and achieving a sense of belonging. Educational Psychologists can play a role in working systemically, guided by Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model (2005), to support educational settings, childcare professionals and parents in better meeting the needs identified as currently relying on alternate means.
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Chapter 1

1. Introduction

Early in the autism literature, Wing and Gould (1979) posited that autistic children had ‘marked’ impairments with imagination, along with socialisation and communication deficits. Wulff (1985) later commented on autistic children's play, stating it is striking in its lack of fantasy and all other aspects of symbolic play. Such criteria have remained core to the widespread understanding of autism and even informed diagnostic criteria: one of the components used as an official measure is ‘difficulty in sharing imaginative play’ (APA, 2013; Jarrold, 2003)

Previous research has found evidence of autistic children having imaginary companions (Davis et al., 2018; 2023), however the experience and meaning has not been explored in detail. Instead, the focus remained on comparison to the typically developing child’s experience of imaginary companions in order to draw conclusions related to cognitive differences.

I conducted a small-scale pilot study about autistic children’s experiences with imaginary companions and, according to parents, the children demonstrated competence in imagination and creativity and there was a high prevalence of paracosms amongst the small sample (Boyle, 2021). Paracosms (imaginary worlds) were a highly unexpected finding: they demonstrate complex imaginative skills and are thought to be seen among just 3-12% of the
population (Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2006) yet an incidence of 75% (6 out of 8 parents interviewed) was reported amongst the parent sample in my pilot study. The findings from this initial pilot study challenge the autism imagination deficit narrative seen across the existing literature base, demonstrate the clear rationale to explore this phenomenon in greater depth and approach the topic of autism and imagination through a person-centred, qualitative lens.

This thesis outlines qualitative research undertaken with autistic children and young people to explore their relationships with imaginary companions and paracosms, with interest in their forms, functions and meanings to the children rather than in the processes of imagery and the children’s cognitive profiles.

1.1. Definitions of imaginary companions, personified objects and paracosms

Svendsen (1934, p.998) defined an imaginary companion as “...an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time...having an air of reality for the child but no apparent objective basis.” Imaginary companions are entirely fanciful constructions, imbued with personality characteristics (Klausen & Passman, 2006).
Over time, definitions for imaginary companions have expanded to include ‘personified objects’. According to Taylor (1999) personified objects, toys that a child plays with over extended periods of time, are considered the equivalent of invisible friends as long as they have a ‘stable personality’. Gleason (2013) noted the imaginary friends and personified objects require their creators be aware of their fictional nature to qualify as imaginary companions. In this thesis, ‘imaginary friends’, ‘invisible friends’, ‘pretend friends’ and ‘personified objects’ are all encompassed through the term ‘imaginary companions’ (ICs).

A paracosm is an imagined place, often but not always inhabited by imagined people or beings and a key feature to a paracosm is its persistence: the child revisits over and again the same make-believe scenario (Root-Bernstein, 2008). The act of a child engaging with their paracoms is referred to as ‘worldplay’, though the child may or may not have a role for themselves in their imaginary world. As with imaginary companions, paracosms are also defined by the child’s ability to distinguish them from reality (Cohen & MacKeith, 1991). In this thesis, the term ‘paracosm’ encompasses ‘imaginary world’, ‘imaginary universe’ and ‘pretend world’, and the term ‘worldplay’ refers to the act of engaging with a paracosm.

1.2. Conceptualisation of autism

Although first described clinically by Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger in the 1940s, autism was not the focus of psychological study until decades later. The
carefully designed and controlled experimental research of Beate Hermelin and Neil O’Connor in the 1970s, followed by Uta Frith in the 1980s, laid the foundation for a vast, and ever-increasing, body of psychological research on autistic children, young people, and adults (Crane & Pellicano, 2022).

In recent years, we have begun to witness a shift in how autism is conceptualised, in part due to advances in our understanding of autism, particularly the broadening of the spectrum to include those without intellectual disability or language delays (Crane & Pellicano, 2022).

In this thesis, autism is understood within the context of the diagnostic criteria but also through the lens of the ‘Autistic Advantage’ approach which considers autistic individuals to be assets to the structures in which they exist (Grant & Kara, 2021). Russell et al. (2019) interviewed autistic individuals and highlighted their perceived strengths in relation to hyperfocus, attention to detail, memory and creativity.

To receive a diagnosis of autism in the UK, an individual is assessed to experience difficulty with social communication and restrictive/repetitive and/or sensory behaviours or interests (APA, 2013). Additionally, while not considered a phenomenological characteristic, anxiety is common amongst autistic children and adolescents (White et al., 2009).
This thesis is also informed by the social model of disability which recognises that the needs of autistic individuals are exacerbated by barriers they face through living in a non-autistic society (Chown et al., 2017). Through this understanding, the focus for change is therefore located in society, through removing such barriers, rather than within the individual.

Identity-first language is used throughout, in line with recommendations shared by the UK autism community through a large-scale study undertaken by Kenny et al. (2016).

1.3. Contextual information from Pilot study

In the first year of my doctoral training, I undertook a pilot study to the thesis, which explored parent perceptions of their autistic children's experiences with imaginary companions. 27 parents participated in an online questionnaire and 8 parents in semi-structured interviews. There was a high incidence of paracosms and parents reported that the children engaged with the worlds and companions regularly, but more when they experienced heightened anxiety. Many parents explained their children struggled with uncertainty in their lives and the imaginary worlds and companions could provide them with a sense of control and relational safety. Within the paracosms, the children often placed themselves centrally in a role which was vital to the sustenance of the world. Parents reported that by removing the unpredictability experienced in real-life friendships, many of the children were able to participate in events such as
birthday parties. When their children were engaging with their imaginary companions and worlds, parents most often saw play which involved theme-setting and lining up: a preferred form of play which the imaginary friends provided access to. All parents explained their children were highly creative and, as well as helping them cope and experiment, the imaginary companions and worlds acted as vehicles for their powerful imaginations.

Analysed with reference to the Human Givens framework (Griffin & Tyrell, 1998), the purposes served by the imaginary companions could be understood as designed to meet several universal emotional needs such as for control, to feel safe, for connection and to feel important. It is possible to make claims about the resilience and resourcefulness of these children, as well as about their high levels of creativity. Though the sample is small and autistic views were not included, the findings challenge the imaginative deficit narrative related to autism: the unexpected prevalence of paracosms in particular demonstrates the potential for a high level of competence in imaginative capacity amongst autistic children. This directly counters the large body of research which outlines imaginative impairment in autism (i.e. Ten Eycke & Muller, 2018; Craig & Baron-Cohen, 1999) and the DSM-5 and ICD-11 diagnostic criteria for Autism which state components of the condition include difficulty in sharing imaginative play (APA, 2013) and limitations in the ability to imagine and respond to the feelings emotional states and attitudes of others (WHO, 2022).
1.4. Significance and rationale of the thesis

Autistic children’s experiences with imaginary companions have not previously been studied qualitatively or without comparison to typically developing children. This research will benefit Educational Psychologists and other professionals working with autistic children and young people by providing a greater understanding of the purposes served by imaginary companions and worlds, the strengths and abilities it can reveal about the individual as well as providing an insight into their emotional needs.

Furthermore, this study provides a valuable contribution to the research base, as a result of the focus on paracosms, which were an exciting and fascinating finding in the pilot study. As well as exploring the phenomenon of paracosms, the research is more generally addressing a paucity in the literature base by exploring children’s experiences and perceptions, so generates new knowledge. There is also significant value in conducting research on the topic of autism which involves community participation, against a landscape of heavily referenced literature which is dated, deficit-oriented and exclusive of the community.
Chapter 2

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This literature review explores research around imagination and children’s symbolic play, both with reference to neurotypical development and the perceived deficits in autistic children’s development. These tensions are further explored and critiqued in relation to literature with a focus on imaginary companions and paracosms. The landscape of autism literature is outlined and underpins the rationale for adopting participatory research methods.

I looked for key, heavily referenced pieces of early research and also sought more recent references to explore the influence of the former on the latter. I did not include literature about imaginary companions with a clinical population (i.e. experiences of hallucinations, disassociation or psychosis) in the inclusion criteria. I used the search engines Google Scholar, UCL Explore and PsycInfo, with the following words and phrases: imaginary companion, imaginary friend, imaginary playmate, paracosm, imaginary world, worldplay, imagination, autism and imagination, autistic children and imagination, symbolic play, autism and symbolic play, participatory research, autism and participatory research, autism and participation, autism research.
2.2. Imagination

Vygotsky (1987) claimed imagination forms the basis of all mature mental activity: it refers to the capacity to mentally transcend time, place, and/or circumstance to think about what might have been, plan and anticipate the future, create fictional worlds, and consider remote and close alternatives to actual experiences (Taylor, 2013). The essential feature that distinguishes imagination from other mental faculties is that it does not repeat combinations of accumulated impressions but builds a new series of impressions from them (Rieber & Carton, 1987).

Piaget (1932) argued early thinking has a playful yet egocentric character and distorts rather than accommodates reality, to fit the self and its desires. Piaget (1932) believed this mode of thinking was transitional and ended as the phase of logical intelligence began: children move from reworking reality in the light of their own cognitive schemas to adapting their cognitive schemas to reality. Harris (2000) reconceptualised this theory through the belief that pretence is not a psychological function which is simply a primitive mode of thinking, but that it forms the basis of sustained imagination: the lifelong mental capacity to consider alternatives to reality.

Harris (2000) argued that children use their imagination to become absorbed in a make-believe world, to make comparisons between actual and alternative outcomes and to explore the impossible and the magical. In practical terms,
Bouldin (2006) explained that children use their imagination as a vehicle to understand the world by breaking it down into units they can manipulate and explore.

2.3. **Symbolic Play**

One of the earliest indices of children’s imagination is their pretend play (Harris, 2000). Jarrold et al. (1993) explain the classification of ‘symbolic play’ includes pretend, dramatic, fantasy, imaginative and non-representative play: these are understood as analogous terms.

Fein (1981) described this form of play as behaviour which is stimulative or non-literal. This was later expanded upon by Leslie (1987) who proposed three fundamental symbolic forms of pretence: object substitution (i.e. using one object to represent another), attribution of absent properties (e.g. pretending a dry table is wet) and imaginary objects present (e.g. pretending an empty cup holds a drink). Harris (2000) added it is also possible to infer symbolism in children’s play which involves temporarily acting out the part of someone other than the self, using pretend actions and utterances.

Much of our current understandings of the early development of pretend play is informed by Piaget (1962) who described how from the age of two onwards, children tend to spontaneously produce a more sustained and complex series of pretend actions; a symbolic form of play which is less dependent on props and
familiar context. Harris (2000) notes children depart from the real world in their pretend play but take much of their conceptual knowledge with them, meaning their pretend play remains bound by certain realities, including the causal powers of the real world.

2.4. Symbolic play and autism

Jarrold et al. (1993) reviewed experimental research into the symbolic play of autistic children in order to outline the nature of their deficit in this area. The authors note the research base preceding 1993 demonstrates ‘good evidence’ for an impairment in the spontaneous symbolic play of autistic children. It could be suggested this is not evidence of a skill impairment but of challenges to exploring skills in a spontaneous manner through experimental means. My pilot study found autistic children spontaneously create ICs and paracosms for specific purposes and to meet specific emotional needs (Boyle, 2021), and the process of discovery involved qualitative enquiry rather than encouraging the children to create ICs in a formal setting with a researcher. Jarrold et al. (1993) explore explanations for the ‘abnormal play in autism’ through two categories: specific competence deficit hypotheses and specific performance deficit hypotheses. Central to competence deficit hypotheses is the idea of autistic individuals having ‘metarepresentational impairment’, which is further explained by the Theory of Mind hypotheses; the argument is that autism is synonymous with a cognitive impairment in the ability to process metarepresentations (Baron-Cohen, 1995). Specific performance deficit hypotheses include some
consideration around motivation, though Jarrold et al. (1993) noted there is no ‘hard evidence’ for this and proposed it could be explained by low expectancies of success and desire for social reinforcement.

Fein et al. (1991) explored symbolic play development among groups of children aged 3-7 (typically developing, autistic and children with language delays). Each child was evaluated using a 25-minute structured play session which was recorded for analysis. Results indicated symbolic play is dependent on cognitive abilities and social comprehension and the children with the most ‘noticeable deficit’ in symbolic play were autistic. These findings from the researchers hold the implication that impairments in symbolic play in autistic children are a symptom of impaired cognitive and social skills. Studies of this nature consider an observable lack of symbolic play to indicate impaired skills and do not account for the possibility of children following their interests and meeting their needs in an experimental setting, rather than playing in a way which will demonstrate certain skills. Doody and Mertz (2013) highlighted autistic children’s preference for and propensity to engage in play which provides sensory feedback, cause-and-effect results and repetitive motions.

2.5. Autism and Imagination

Craig and Baron-Cohen (1999) explored the notion of ‘impoverished creativity’ being an aspect of the imagination deficit in autism. This is a heavily referenced study which I shall consider in detail then make reference to its influence and
impact on current research and societal rhetoric. To operationalise the concept ‘creativity’, Craig and Baron-Cohen (1999) included standardised tests, called Torrance Tests, in the experimental design which were administered to autistic children to measure their creative capabilities. Craig and Baron-Cohen (1999) administered these tests to four groups of up to 15 children; a typically developing group, a group with moderate learning difficulties, a group with a diagnosis of autism and a group who had received a diagnosis of Asperger’s Syndrome. Asperger’s Syndrome was previously recognised as meeting the criteria for autism but with no history of general or cognitive or language delay, however the term Asperger’s is no longer used and has now been replaced by the collective term ‘autism spectrum disorder’ (APA, 2013). The Torrance tests are scored against three dimensions of creativity: fluency (number of responses), flexibility (number of categories the responses cover) and originality (the statistical rarity of the responses based on standardised norms).

Experiment 1 involved the experimenter presenting the participant with 30 pairs of parallel lines on a sheet and asking them to make some different pictures by adding to the lines. The child was asked what each image was and this was written underneath before being prompted by the experimenter to draw something ‘completely different’ with the next pair of lines. There was no time limit and the assessment ended when the child explained they could not do any more. Analysis demonstrated the autism and Asperger’s groups scored significantly lower than the other two groups in Experiment 1, and the autism group scored significantly lower than the Asperger’s group. The researchers
concluded these findings reveal an overall impairment in creativity in children who have been diagnosed with autism and Asperger's (Craig & Baron-Cohen, 1999).

The measures used as indicators for creativity in experiment 1 represent a narrow construct of what creativity looks like and can be understood as neurotypically biased, through their design being bound by the constraints of a neurotypical mind. Experiments of this nature can be understood as reductionist in design and they exclude opportunities to explore what autistic creativity may look like, thereby also removing opportunities to learn from autistic individuals as opposed to classifying their deficits. Bervoets and Hens (2020) state a humanistic approach to understanding autism is in direct conflict with the physiological underpinnings of the literature base, presenting as a moral dilemma.

The creation of a paracosm is understood to require all aspects of the Torrance tests (fluency, flexibility and originality) (Root-Bernstein, 2008), yet the design of the assessment (drawing completion task) does not allow for demonstration of these skills from all individuals. As autistic children have been demonstrated to create paracosms (Boyle, 2021) this experiment and others of its kind can therefore be understood as having low construct validity, as they do not appear to accurately capture skills being assessed across a varied sample.
Craig and Baron-Cohen (1999) undertook a further two experiments with the same sample to explore these findings being indicative of the executive dysfunction theory of creativity deficits. Experiment 2 involved exploring the production of novel but real-world events and novel but purely imaginative events. Examples the researchers gave of real-world events include coming up with a new move in chess; examples of imaginative events included painting a picture of an object that ‘could never exist’. The children were given a teddy and asked to say ways in which they could make it ‘more fun to play with’. The researchers presented the hypothesis that the autistic group would demonstrate impairments in both activities, in line with the ‘generalised executive dysfunction’ theory. The same group of children was used and analysis showed the autism and Asperger’s groups differed significantly from the control groups, showing both less imaginative creativity and fewer responses overall (Craig & Baron-Cohen, 1999).

Experiment 2 presents a challenging concept to children and their grasp of the instructions was likely to be dependent on what they had been exposed to in their lives previously (e.g. the rules of chess). With the toy, responses might have been influenced by how adults in their lives had played with them. As such, adopting an eco-systemic perspective, in line with Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological model, allows us to see the multiple interacting factors which are likely to affect the child’s ability to provide on-demand and sufficiently imaginative responses. It is an arguably abstract task which serves no purpose to the child in the way creating an IC is understood to (Majors, 2013) and
furthermore, the researchers formed a negative hypothesis. Robson (2011) highlights risks of researcher bias without neutral hypotheses. I argue it is effective to explore imaginative creativity already existing through qualitative measures with children, rather than requesting novel examples of imagination.

Experiment 3 in this study was a test of ‘imaginative fluency’. The same participants were given 3D foam shapes and asked to generate as many responses as to what the shape could be. All responses were recorded, with particular interest in ‘animate’ responses given. Analysis revealed the autism and Asperger’s groups differed significantly from the control groups: 33% of children with autism and 53% of children with Asperger’s produced animate responses, whereas 100% of the children with MLD and the typically developing children did (Craig & Baron-Cohen, 1999).

The prompt for experiment 3 was, ‘tell me lots of things this could be, what does it look like? It can be anything you like’. These are three separate and conflicting prompts; what it looks like can be understood literally and what it could be does not necessarily imply in an imaginative sense. The authors noted the overall tendency of the children in the autism and Asperger's groups was to produce responses that were ‘real’ inanimate objects which the foam shapes resembled closely. It is possible the language used contributed to these findings. The experiment used complicated prompts, provided a lack of clarity around the purpose of task and there was a lack of visual tools to support the instructions. The latter two are recognised as areas autistic individuals benefit from provision.
with (Goodall, 2005), demonstrating that what we now know and recognise as important to differentiate was not considered in previous research, and it is likely such findings have been affected as a result.

The researchers concluded the results of the three experiments demonstrate evidence of an imagination deficit amongst autistic and Asperger’s children and suggested this plays a crucial role in their impoverished creativity. In terms of the cause of this ‘abnormality in the functioning of the imagination’, the researchers proposed the Theory of Mind hypothesis as a more suitable explanation than executive dysfunction (Craig & Baron-Cohen, 1999).

Using quantitative analysis does not allow for consideration of qualitative observational data, which may have been indicative of children struggling with the setting, environment or questioning. The nature of the condition means children may struggle with sensory sensitivities, unclear instructions or heightened anxiety (APA, 2013; White et al., 2009) and it is possible such experiments have historically disadvantaged autistic participants through their format and lack of adjustments, thereby placing the reliability of the findings at risk.

Thorough examination of one of the key pieces of research proposing and defining the imagination deficit has demonstrated it does not stand the test of time, through highlighting issues related to design, validity and reliability. Such studies are still heavily referenced without such critique, demonstrating the
sheer influence they hold in maintaining the deficit narrative surrounding autism and imagination. This emphasises the importance of qualitative research in autism (Grant & Kara, 2021), as well as careful reflection around power dynamics: who is carrying out research and for what purpose? Neurotypical researchers designing experiments for autistic subjects and drawing conclusions in line with their hypotheses presents as an ethical issue: Cascio et al. (2020) state ethical practice in research goes beyond consent documents and addresses the broader issues of respect, inclusion and empowerment, much of which is often missing in autism research.

Ten Eycke and Muller (2018) noted the autism imagination deficit is still not well understood and highlighted contradictory findings within the research base around the Theory of Mind hypothesis. Ten Eycke and Muller (2018) stated such findings have led researchers to examine difficulties in executive function and visual-perceptual style as an alternative root of the impairment. This provides the rationale for their study, which explored the relation between cognitive process and imaginative drawings amongst 29 typically developing children and 22 autistic children. All children were administered the Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test-2 battery which offers an estimate of verbal and non-verbal intelligence as well as a composite IQ score.

Following this, the children completed the Karmiloff-Smith drawing task (1990), in which they were given instructions to draw a picture of a person who looks strange and funny, followed by a picture of a person who looks normal. The
participants then carried out the same task but with the drawing subject of a house instead of a person. Children were given a test to identify real vs impossible images beforehand to ensure they understood the task and rigour was introduced to analysis through a coding system based on the proportion of imaginative content calculated. A second independent rater was given the same scoring system without knowledge of which participants did which drawings to reduce effects of researcher bias through the data analysis. There was virtually no group differences in performance across tasks but the authors noted there are different cognitive processes involved in imaginative drawing with autism compared to typically developing children (Ten Eycke & Muller, 2018).

Inter-rater reliability and the use of a drawing activity are strengths of this design, though the use of intelligence testing make it challenging to draw conclusions when using this as a predictive measure. Deustch and Reynolds (2000) have highlighted cognitive assessments are more likely to demonstrate a snapshot of ability than an accurate and holistic overview, and the snapshot itself is likely to be affected by extraneous factors on the day of testing. Furthermore, the creativity test (Karmiloff-Smith, 1990) is arguably more revealing of social constructs around what is considered normal than a measure of ability, due to its subjective nature.

There are multiple theories around the ‘imagination deficit’ and inconsistent findings across the literature base. This holds the implication that exploring imagination through tests and experiments is not fruitful in accessing and
understanding children’s internal worlds. Additionally, the common use of control groups has likely contributed to narratives concerning ‘impairment’ thus can be harmful when used to highlight a deficit within an individual or group.

In terms of the impact of such literature on general perceptions around autism, Quirici (2015) describes the assumption of autistic individuals being best suited to pragmatic disciplines over abstract pursuits. Quirici (2015) explains that despite numerous examples of the artificiality of such a divide, the stereotype of the ‘autistic genius without imagination’ endures. Furthermore, whether or not such profiles exist, anatomising difference carries weighted social repercussions: there is risk of ‘othering’ and ‘isolating’ autistic individuals through the dehumanising act of ascribing character to their cognitive functioning. Botha et al. (2022) found autistic people experience stigma as a result of society conferring negative meanings onto autism, and thus them. Quirici (2015) highlights the importance of reading individual differences to expand and nuance our understanding of concepts such as imagination, rather than allowing clinical rhetoric to shape perceptions of autistic ability.

Quirici (2015) notes that the important work of challenging dated narratives which pathologize autism has begun; this can be seen through Mills’s (2007) critique of the Theory of Mind hypothesis, suggesting instead the autistic imagination should be understood as an ‘alternative style of knowing, rather than in terms of deficit’. Conceptualising the Theory of Mind as a spectrum appears to serve the deficit narrative as opposed to challenge it, and I argue the
categorisation of autistic CYP through research according to ability is a meaningless pursuit in light of findings which fundamentally challenge the Theory of Mind hypothesis in its totality: autistic children creating ICs which present with their own mental representations (i.e. Boyle, 2021; Davis, 2018). Crane and Pellicano (2022) explain there is a growing coalition of researchers invested in challenging harmful and pathologizing rhetoric, however this cannot yet be recognised as a widespread movement.

### 2.6. Imaginary companions

ICs are a fascinating feature of childhood and have emerged as a unique research area due to them being naturally emitted by children, thus presenting as expressions of private experiences which are frequently observable yet relatively impervious to undue external influence (Klausen & Passman, 2006). For this reason, the phenomena is interesting to both clinical psychology and developmental psychology populations as is evident across the research base. Many early descriptions of ICs were depicted in terms of spirits and other supernatural concepts, though alongside the development of the concept of childhood they have become more widely understood as imaginative manifestations, providing valuable insights to the lives of children (Klausen & Passman, 2006).

Early research includes Cooley’s (1922) suggestion that ICs are evidence of the human need to socialise, even if only with a pretend entity, and Terman (1926),
in his early work around intelligence, referenced ICs as something for which gifted children have a propensity. Svendsen (1934) carried out one of the first studies which focused on the quantification of data regarding ICs and, in 1935, Griffiths undertook further empirical research by interviewing 50 five-year-olds about their imagination. The findings suggested ICs can support children’s coping, especially with loss, and can personify negative feelings which children may have difficulty processing (Griffiths, 1935).

Piaget (1955) contributed to unfolding theory around ICs, suggesting they can be understood as part of the developmental transition from self-talk to social speech and from around this point in time, commentary around the phenomena appeared to become underpinned by theoretical frameworks more frequently. Wickes (1966) considered ICs as the ideal means by which to study the nature and functioning of the psyche and Baron (1990) also explored the role of imaginary companions through a psychoanalytic lens, led by Freud’s proposition that our personality has both an unconscious mind (id and superego) and a conscious mind (ego) (Freud, 1968). Baron (1990) suggests the unconscious mind is manifested through children’s imaginary companions, meaning they are outlets for the individual’s superego (purveyor of rewards and punishment) and id (primitive urges and impulses), mediated by the child acting out the ego role (driven by reason and modified by external influences). Adopting this psychological lens allows us to view the relationships with and interactions between a child and their imaginary companions with greater depth and
meaning: all features of the ICs can be understood as extensions of the child’s personality and demonstrating their developing interests, desires, and needs.

Klausen and Passman (2006) reviewed the history of research into imaginary companions and noted a ‘midcentury lull’ between 1940 and 1980 which saw a lack of studies into the phenomena despite the increase seen in the 1930s. The authors hypothesise it could be the result of how well imaginary companions corresponded with the dominant approaches in psychology during the late 19th and early 20th century, which valued introspection, but were less compatible with the behaviourism which became dominant in psychology after the mid-19th century (Klausen & Passman, 2006). However, the lull ended in the 1980s and children’s imaginary companions became important considerations in research concerning theory of mind, children’s imagination, the development of play and understanding certain forms of psychopathology (Klausen & Passman, 2006).

Imaginary companions were previously considered to be a concerning pastime and viewed negatively. Cohen (1996) reviewed the topic of imaginary companions and highlighted the societal shift in attitude since the 1930s. Cohen (1996) noted child-care books from the 1930s advised parents to discourage their child from engaging in play with imaginary friends, as it could lead to schizophrenia. Nowadays, imaginary companions are understood as a positive feature in the lives of children and young people: Majors and Baines (2017) used parent perceptions to explore the functions of children’s imaginary companions. They concluded these encompassed the imaginary companion
acting to enable problem solving and the management of emotion, to enable to exploration of ideas, as a companion for joint fantasy play, as a companion to overcome times of loneliness and to allow children to explore behaviours and roles. This study highlighted the multifunctionality of imaginary companions and detailed several of the broad range of purposes they serve for the children who engage with them, through parent perceptions. Imaginary companions are now viewed through a more positive lens with the understanding that they can support children’s emotional and social development.

Clinical research has more often tended to associate imaginary companions with loneliness, trauma and emotional distress (i.e. Benson & Pryor, 1973; Nagera, 1969). However, following a review of the literature, Armah & Landers-Potts (2021) emphasised ICs are not necessarily an indication of pathology or social incompetence: findings are often mixed due to methodological variation, but it became clear to the authors that against many measures, children with ICs do not differ significantly from their peers.

Research is of bidirectional interest in that detail of the imaginary companion also provides insight into the child’s inner world. ICs are generally thought to be linked to a host of cognitive and social benefits for young children and the creators often exhibit a deeper understanding of the emotions and mental states of others, as well as greater social orientation and greater capacity for creative thought (Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021).
2.7. Typically developing children’s experiences of imaginary companions

Pearson et al. (2001) asked 1,759 randomly selected children between the ages of 5-12 whether they had present or past experiences of imaginary companions. 829 (46.2%) children, predominantly female, reported having experiences of imaginary companions. As with much of the research at the time, the authors were interested in the interactions between imaginary companions and age and creativity measures. Results indicated imaginary companions are not exclusively experienced by very young children, though it was apparent to interviewers that from 10 years upwards, some children showed reluctance to respond to questions and several informed the interviewers, after the interview was completed, that they did in fact have imaginary companions despite reporting they did not. This is supported by Prinsen and Hellendoorn’s (1989) research which suggested older children struggle to discuss their imaginary companions due to fear of negative reactions from others. Pearson et al. (2001) argue creating imaginary companions is a part of ‘mainstream child development’ and is not significantly related to levels of creativity, suggesting they have therefore historically not been well researched or understood.

A higher level of incidence is supported by Taylor et al.’s (2004) research, which found imaginary companions are reported to appear most frequently in children up to the age of seven. Within this age group, it is reported that as many as 65% have, or have had, one or more imaginary companion (Taylor et al., 2004).
Using their sample of 100 children, Taylor et al. (2004) found no differences in experience between gender and explained this form of imaginative play was related to emotion understanding, ego control and theory of mind.

Majors (2013) undertook qualitative research with children to explore the experience and meaning of their first-hand relationships with ICs over time. The sample consisted of eight typically developing children: five girls and three boys aged between 5 and 11 years. Through semi-structured interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Majors (2013) discovered the imaginary companions were characteristically diverse, in terms of being animal or human, as well as with regards to age, gender and temperament. Most children in the study had more than one imaginary companion and they were often more private experiences for older children. The children were able to express the importance of the relationships with their imaginary companions and described them as serving purposes of providing friendship, helping the child overcome boredom or loneliness, enabling the child to express and release anger or upset, offering support for problem situations and providing access to wish fulfilment such as owning a pet. Overall, the children in the study spoke positively about their imaginary companions and valued both the supportive elements of the relationship as well as the more playful and connection-based aspects (Majors, 2013).

Hoff (2005) explored gender differences in greater detail with a sample of 69 children aged 9-10 and found girls were more likely to have imaginary animal
friends and imaginary companions of the opposite sex. Furthermore, girls were also reported playing more often with other real playmates together with their imaginary companions, implying they are often more private experiences for boys of the same age. Bouldin and Pratt (1999) suggested a significantly larger number of children with imaginary companions are first-born children, using a sample of 478 children.

Bouldin and Pratt (2002) explored the temperament of children with imaginary companions and found some elevated levels of anxiety, using assessment scales completed by parents, though no overall indication that children with imaginary companions experience emotional difficulties. There are issues with using parent-report for emotional scales: Krain & Kendall (2000) explain parents often rate children higher than the child’s self-report. However, the suggestion of elevated anxiety is in line with the findings from the pilot study which noted a relationship between heightened anxiety and increased engagement with imaginary companions and imaginary worlds (Boyle, 2021).

Gleason (2013) believes the form of the imaginary relationship may be linked to the social tasks of the developmental period in which it is created and the existence of imaginary social partners is testament to the importance of social relationships in human psychological functioning. Gleason (2013) argues the significance of the phenomena is through how imaginary companions complement and enhance our real social experiences in predominantly three ways: acting as sources of social affordances (being able to satisfy social
needs), as processing tools (supporting the management and maintenance of relationships with others) and in social development (addressing particularly challenging developmental tasks in the social domain). Gleason (2013) states imaginary relationships are not a prerequisite for healthy social adaptation but their existence is indicative of our social nature and creativity in addressing social problems; particularly through our use of the imagination to solve problems, cope and explore different roles and relationships in the safety of our own minds.

2.8. Children with additional needs’ experiences of imaginary companions

Smith (2019) explored blind and deaf children’s imaginary companions in relation to typically developing children’s and noted the paucity in the research base with regards to children who ‘experience the world differently’, through the generalised focus on the experiences of typically developing children. Smith (2019) proposed the value in focusing on the experiences of children with additional needs: if we understand imagination as a vehicle for understanding the world, it may be of particular benefit for children who experience difference in the ways we typically explore our environment. Smith (2019) focused their research on exploring this notion of ‘untapped assets’ among deaf and blind children through semi-structured interviews and teacher questionnaires. The study included 51 children aged between 8-12 years: 12 were blind, 13 were deaf and 26 were typically developing.
Findings demonstrated the distribution of ICs across the three groups was not uniform: 53.8% of typically developing children reported an IC whereas 76.9% of deaf children and 33.3% of blind children reported an IC. The results suggested the role of imagination in the lives of deaf children may have previously been underestimated. This is an important finding for those who work with and support deaf children as it heightens the awareness of the phenomena and provides the opportunity to explore meaning behind their experiences and, in turn, their social and emotional needs. Smith (2019) suggested the lower incidence of ICs among the sample of blind children may be related to difficulties with peer play, thus making ICs less desirable or more challenging to create for this population. However, in terms of the forms and functions of the ICs, Smith (2019) noted little variation and emphasised the association of ICs with social and emotional benefits.

Despite the small sample in this study making it challenging to generalise, it can be suggested that children with additional needs related to hearing and vision demonstrate commonality in their experiences to those of typically developing children and, in some instances, a greater propensity to engage with imaginary companions. The aspect of universality in experience in childhood appears interesting in these findings and highlights the importance of including children with additional needs in research around imaginative capacity.
The rich, qualitative exploration of typically developing children’s experiences with imaginary companions seen in the research base enables us to learn about the developmental and emotional needs of the children through certain periods of their lives (Majors, 2013). Such valuable insights are not yet available concerning autistic children as their experiences with imaginary companions have not been captured to the same extent, only through parent perspectives in quantitative studies (Davis et al., 2018; 2023).

The lack of research into autistic children’s experiences with imaginary companions is possibly the result of the widely held assumptions that the phenomenon requires social and imaginative skills that the autistic population do not generally possess. This belief can be attributed to the nature of the literature base, which has historically been concerned with pathologizing autism as a result of resounding interest in cognitive differences in comparison to the neurotypical brain. Furthermore, social motivation has also been considered lacking in research: Over (2016) explored ‘social motivational deficits’ in autism in relation to the need to belong and considered factors such as lower interest in friendships (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2003) and discomfort with social stimuli (Dubey et al., 2015) to understand this notion. Such findings may inform hypotheses that autistic CYP are less likely to engage with ICs, unlike their neurotypical counterparts.

Davis et al. (2018) explored parent perceptions of their autistic children’s experiences with imaginary companions through a quantitative lens. The
researchers used a comparative design by also including parents of typically developing children in their sample. Prioritising parent views in autism research places autistic children at risk of marginalisation, according to Fletcher-Watson et al. (2019) and the research aims are based upon comparing experiences to those of typically developing children, and the relationships between IC creation, age and cognitive functioning. These two aspects of design could raise concern when considering whether the lived experiences of autistic children were prioritised through all stages of this research.

Using a questionnaire with 111 parents, it was reported that 16.2% of autistic children had created an IC; 39% of these were invisible characters and 61% were personified objects (Davis et al., 2018). The researchers found differences to typically developing children’s experiences in relation to the ICs having less ‘well-developed’ personalities, the autistic children’s parents being less aware of the ICs and the age of IC creation being older. Davis et al. (2018) concluded by stating the results confirm much of the research on deficits in autism.

The authors undertook further research on the topic to determine whether parents of autistic children with an IC report them as having more developed Theory of Mind and social skills than autistic children without an IC (Davis et al. 2023). 124 parents were included in the quantitative study and findings demonstrated almost half of them reported their child had an IC and also rated them significantly higher on both inventories than those who did not create ICs (Davis et al., 2023). Again, this research relies on parent report and does not
consider the experience or meaning for the autistic children through qualitative means.

The existence of ICs among a sample of autistic children is a disruptive and exciting finding, but the impact becomes lost when presenting it in comparison to the experiences of typically developing children. Taylor (1999) suggested children who create imaginary companions are particularly good at understanding other people’s minds. With this understanding, the evidence of autistic children creating imaginary companions from Davis et al. (2018, 2023) would therefore directly challenge Theory of Mind hypothesis (Baron-Cohen, 1995).

2.9. Paracosms

Silvey and MacKeith (1999) described paracosms as spontaneously created, but maintained and elaborated, imaginary private worlds, and offered three key characteristics: the child distinguishes clearly between what is imaginary and what really exists, the child’s interest in their paracosm is sustained over an ‘appreciable’ length of time and, the child’s private world is important to them and matters in their life. Silvey and MacKeith collected 64 accounts of paracosms over more than a decade. The authors share their impression that paracosms are therefore likely to be a rare phenomenon, far less common than ICs. However, it is clear that a lack of structure was in place through the years in terms of recruitment and sample selection: the authors speak of scanning
autobiographies and publishing letters in newspapers. Using both purposive and self-selecting sampling methods over a period of ten years makes it difficult to make claims about the prevalence. Interestingly, only 3 participants were children and 61 were adults, talking of their past paracosms. As much of the recruitment appears to be through adult channels (i.e. newspapers) it is likely that few children would have learnt of the research, particularly as the researchers highlight that paracosms are often a private phenomenon, so adults in the children’s lives may not have known to share details of the study with them. Furthermore, the particular channels used are likely to bias socio-economic makeup of the sample. In contrast, Taylor et al. (2018) found in a sample of 169 children, 17% had created their own complicated universe, thus claimed paracosms are ‘not simply the province of budding novelists’.

Silvey and MacKeith (1999) researched the accounts of paracosms using a questionnaire which was primarily interested in the form and content of parcosms but also sought information about the circumstances of their creation and about the creators themselves. Through their analysis, the authors highlighted how clear it was that creating a paracosm is a long-term, emotional investment for the individual, but there was great variation between participants keeping their world completely private and sharing it with others, often close friends and family. The authors explored the ages at which the participants began to engage in worldplay and found 19% of participants created their first paracosm during the 3-6 age period, 74% during the 7-12 age period and 7% between ages 13-16. They noted a particular ‘peak’ in paracosm
commencements between the age of 8-9 years amongst their sample. This is supported by Root-Bernstein (2008) who found this form of play peaks in middle childhood, and Taylor et al. (2018) who proposed many paracosms are created through older children finding a home for their childhood ICs.

Silvey and MacKeith (1999) categorised the paracosms into five content groups: (1) toys, animals and family groups, (2) particular places and communities, (3) islands, countries and their peoples, (4) systems, documents and languages, (5) unstructured shifting and idyllic worlds. Paracosms created between the ages of 3-6 most often belonged to groups 1 and 2; the authors commented these worlds often appeared to involve elements of ‘wish fulfilment’ as well as ‘acting out’ events: functions also provided by individual ICs as seen through Major’s (2013) research. Paracosms created between the ages of 7-12 tended to be more detailed, sophisticated and systemised. The content generally fell within the ‘lower groups’ on the content list and appeared to be heavily influenced by the child’s particular temperament, interests and knowledge. Silvey and MacKeith explained the few paracosms they discovered which started between the ages of 13-18 tended to demonstrate remarkably detailed knowledge of a ‘pet subject’.

With regards to paracosms’ ending, Silvey and MacKeith (1999) found out of the 64 participants, 5 had paracosms which persisted to adulthood; few had made a conscious decision to disengage, mainly due to perceptions of it being a childish activity, but for the majority the private world was simply called to mind less
often. In light of IC research from Majors (2013), this could hold the implication that the paracosm was serving a purpose which was no longer needed by the individual.

Silvey and MacKeith (1999) included a question about the satisfaction derived from the imaginary world and found repeated references to the joy of the life of the imagination in contrast to the dullness of reality, as well as comments around being ‘in control’ of all aspects of the world and being able to escape to a comforting place. These are concurrent with findings from the pilot study (Boyle, 2021) and appear in line with several of the key components of the PERMA model for wellbeing: Created by Seligman (2011), the PERMA model represents five key elements which contribute to positive mental health: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement. Through this lens, Silvey and MacKeith’s (1999) findings give indications worldplay is a positive activity for wellbeing and mental health.

Root-Bernstein (2008) stated paracosms are the most complex form of imaginative play in childhood, and worldplay often involves the generation of stories which provide evidence of creative giftedness. Root-Bernstein (2008) stated gifted children invent imaginary worlds of their own design as a way of creating meaning out of the experience and knowledge they have accumulated in their lives. Worldplay distinguishes itself as a complex and elaborate form of imaginative play through its persistent, rather than ephemeral, nature: the child revisits the same make-believe scenario for weeks, months or even years (Root-
Bernstein, 2008). The author states the child who invents an imaginary world often uses it to support the development of their sense of self as a creator and the benefit of worldplay therefore lies in its inner influence upon the child (Root-Bernstein, 2008). This claim is in contrast to the findings of my pilot study which suggested autistic children benefit from worldplay through its regulatory function (Boyle, 2021).

In terms of prevalence, Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein (2006) proposed paracosms are seen among 3-12% of the general population. However, to gain this figure the researchers used a questionnaire among university students; the private nature of the phenomenon could have affected truthfulness. ICs and paracosms are difficult phenomena to research exhaustively because for many, they are special because they are secret (Klausen & Passman, 2006). Furthermore, a sample of university students would not typically be representative of the diversity of race, socio-economic status and ability one would expect to see across the general population.

Root-Bernstein (2008) suggested worldplay enables the individual to develop their imaginative capacities including imagery, empathising and modelling. It is interesting to consider these particular skills as strong among children who engage with paracosms as they are often considered ‘missing’ among autistic individuals through the Theory of Mind hypothesis (Baron-Cohen, 1995). The findings from the pilot study demonstrated autistic children can create paracosms (Boyle, 2021) which is a significant finding in the context of such
claims around abilities worldplay enhances. Root-Bernstein (2008) also argues self-initiated and self-sustained worldplay supports the capacity for convergent problem solving within an imagined yet consistent system, whether it is realistic or fantastic. This is supported by findings in the pilot study which showed some autistic children placed themselves in roles of importance within their paracosms and were responsible for mediating disagreements between others and managing the day-to-day functioning of the world (Boyle, 2021).

Parallels can be drawn between autistic and non-autistic experiences of worldplay, yet the suggested paracosm creator would appear improbable when considered against the literature base concerning autistic cognition and ability: Root-Bernstein (2008) suggests worldplay is related to giftedness in adulthood yet autistic individuals have historically been described having imaginative impairments (i.e. Craig and Baron-Cohen, 1999; Jarrold et al., 1993). This demonstrates the remarkable disservice research of a quantitative nature on this topic has offered the autistic community.

Paracosm research is generally more qualitative, however, there is minimal recent research into the phenomena. As with ICs, research into paracosms highlights the importance of parents encouraging the continuation of their children’s imaginary activities to protect the important aspects of development they support. Silvey and MacKeith (1999) emphasised the positive role paracosms play in a child’s life and Root-Bernstein (2008) notes worldplay ought to be tolerated as long as the child wishes to pursue it, which may mean
resisting desires to inhibit solitude or imaginative play in adolescence in favour of more social play.

2.10. Autism and paracosms

Taylor et al. (2018) noted some descriptions of paracosms have features which resemble activities associated with autism such as preference for solitary activity and obsessive interest in systemizing. However, no studies about autistic individual’s paracosms were identified in the literature base.

Interestingly, a paracosm was identified in a piece of research about intellectual disability and inclusion in Norway recently: Snipstad (2020) explored how ‘categories influence the categorised’ through examining the impact of segregation in a school environment on a child and how they construct their identity. The research involved a case study of a 12-year-old child who is labelled as ‘intellectually disabled’ and spends most of his time segregated from peers. The researcher collected data over a month-long period through participant observations and 3 semi-structured interviews. The child was ‘followed’ 3 to 4 days per week sometimes for the whole day and other days for about 4 hours. The interviews were based around themes related to inclusion and social participation, though their semi-structured nature enabled the researcher to engage in conversations referring to activities which had been observed previously. Each interview lasted between 40 minutes and 1 hour.
The child had several imaginary companions with multiple roles and functions. The researcher used the term ‘imaginary universe’ to explain his experience due to the persistent, evolving and co-existing nature of the companions. It was noted that the imaginary companions were meaningful to the child, but discussion centred around whether these relationships can substitute real peer relationships, rather than exploring the meaning in more detail. A key theme found in pilot study I conducted (Boyle, 2021) was that paracosms serve the purpose of escapism for autistic children, enabling them to cope with heightened levels of anxiety: the children were more likely to engage with their imaginary worlds when they were feeling more anxious in the real world. Being followed by a researcher as well as the lengthy nature of the multiple interviews could be anxiety-inducing for a child, particularly an autistic child. However, despite indications the child experienced social communication difficulties, the nature of their profile of needs was not made clear in this article. Snipstad (2020) offers the suggestion that engaging with an imaginary world is a negative outcome to exclusion in school environment and is therefore synonymous with loneliness. Loneliness has been understood as a motivating factor to engage with imaginary companions (Taylor, 1999), however this is no longer understood to be the driving factor. Majors and Baines (2017) note the shift away from understanding imaginary play of this form as concerning in childhood to a recognition of the positive aspects of social and emotional development it can provide. More recent research conducted by Lin et al. (2018) in fact demonstrated children with imaginary companions were more popular and were rated higher in social
competence than children without them, outlining this shift in understanding the children who create ICs and paracosms.

2.11. Autism research

Pellicano et al. (2014) analysed the landscape of autism research within the UK and found out of 106 research funding awards made between 2007-2011, projects in the areas of biology, brain and cognition far outstripped all other areas, in terms of both money spent and number of awards made. UK and international research on autism and imaginative capacity appears consistent with the wider body, in that it is largely a biological topic with little focus on first-hand experience, particularly with children.

Autism has historically been framed as a pathologized abnormality within the literature base and autistic individuals have generally been researched as subjects: many within the autistic community have adopted the political slogan of ‘Nothing About Us, Without Us’, yet research into autism continues to largely sideline potential valuable insights from research of a qualitative and/or participatory nature (Milton, 2013).

Review of existing research has demonstrated a dissonance between historical beliefs of autistic ability in terms of creativity and imagination, and autistic children engaging in imaginary play which is considered particularly complex. There is a substantial difference between claims of a lack of imagination and
evidence of imaginative giftedness. I suggest this discrepancy is related to the research base lacking the views and voices of autistic individuals, as well as their needs not being adequately considered in research designs. Testing imagination through experimental methods and measuring creativity through standardising play provides no opportunity to learn from first-hand experiences. Furthermore, as Chown et al. (2017) explain, since the emergence of autism research, it has remained almost exclusively the preserve of clinicians and non-autistic researchers, and Crane and Pellicano (2022) suggest much of the research stems from the assumption that the way that autistic people experience and interact with the world is inherently wrong. This raises issues related to power in research and the impact of power imbalance.

There appears to be an academic hangover in the way that much of the existing literature is used to inform further study, rather than being challenged and critiqued through the lens of more recent understandings of autism and with knowledge of the social impact research of this nature can have (Crane & Pellicano, 2022). Ethical risks to undertaking and sharing research which is deficit-oriented by nature include the popularisation of therapies, such as ABA (applied behavioural analysis) and CAM (complementary and alternative therapies for autism), which are widely used to reduce and erase autistic traits from individuals (Milton, 2013).

Crane and Pellicano (2022) explained the power balance in autism research is beginning to shift, albeit very gradually. Whilst autism researchers have
historically been accustomed to setting agendas with regards to the focus of autism research, autistic people, their family members and the professionals who support them are now beginning to be invited to have a stake in the research that shapes autistic people’s lives: as a consultant during the research process, as part of an advisory group for the research, or as a collaborator. Furthermore, tools are being created such as Research Passports (CRAE, 2022) which are digital records that autistic individuals can use to share their personal needs and experiences before taking part in research projects, thus enabling researchers to carefully design methodologies which take these into account.

2.12. Participatory research

Milton and Bracher (2013) argue it is problematic if the autistic voice is not heard in relation to social scientific research seeking to further develop knowledge of autism. Furthermore, Quirici (2015) highlights the importance of conducting research within the field of autism which serves the purpose of supporting empowerment rather than exacerbating ableism. By designing my research with a focus on the strengths and abilities of autistic individuals, and by including community voices wherever possible, I am recognising my academic responsibility to promote positive narratives. Arnstein (1969) outlined citizen participation and its relation to power through a ‘ladder of participation’; the first rung represents empty ritual where participation has no impact and the top rung represents citizen control, in which there is significant influence over the
outcome of a process (see Figure 1). This ladder is considered in relation to participatory research often and prompts reflection as to how participatory the measures taken truly are on the outcome of a project.

![Figure 1. Arnstein’s (1969) ‘Ladder of Participation’](image)

Fletcher-Watson et al (2019) explored effective participatory working for autism research through a series of seminars with researchers, stakeholders from the autistic community and their allies, third-sector organisations, commissioners, policy-makers and autism research funders. One clear and repeated message shared throughout was the need for autistic views to be heard and taken seriously at all stages of the process. Fletcher-Watson et al. (2019) explained research is meaningful to the autistic community if undertaken as part of the wider agenda addressing oppressive assumptions, and thus in line with the overarching motivation to improve outcomes for autistic people and those who support them.
It is therefore timely to produce research which is participatory by nature and serves to challenge oppressive and dated discourses, which are driven by viewing autism in relation to a normative standard. Community participation is an important feature in my research and the overall research aims are driven by an interest in individual experience.
Chapter 3

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Aims

This thesis aims to explore autistic children and young people’s experiences of imagination by keeping their views and experiences central to the research and adopting participatory measures, to ensure the research is in the best interest of the community, while maintaining the rigour and status of validity which is expected from academic research.

I aim to use community voices to raise strengths in autistic imaginative capacity and enable focus on what the neurotypical population can learn about autistic individuals from these experiences, rather than about their cognition. I aim to discourage the use of neurotypical barometers to measure competency in imagination; instead of testing, promoting the use of qualitative enquiry which focuses on individual experience and meaning. The thesis also aims to demonstrate the value and importance of community participation when researching autism.
3.2. Research Questions

The research questions are exploratory in nature, holding the assumption that there is a lot we do not know about autistic children and young people’s experiences with imaginary companions and paracosms:

- RQ1: What are the characteristics of autistic children and young people’s imaginary companions and paracosms?
- RQ2: What are the advantages and disadvantages to having the imaginary companions and paracosms?
- RQ3: What are the purposes served by the imaginary companions and paracosms?

3.3. Research Design and Paradigm

From a methodological perspective, the thesis is qualitative in nature and reflects the inclusion of participatory measures through its consultation with autistic individuals about the interview design. Interviews are a key feature of the design in order to elicit the views of the participants. This is particularly pertinent considering that the views of autistic children are so often excluded, as seen throughout the literature review. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was originally considered to analyse the data due to its interest in participants’ lived experiences (Robson, 2011), however due to a lack of homogeneity across the
sample this was not possible and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used instead, the reasoning for which is discussed later in this chapter.

This research adopts an inductive approach so as to ensure conclusions derive from the experiences and perceptions shared by the CYP participants; there are no hypotheses being tested in order to answer the research questions.

### 3.4. Theoretical Framework and Epistemology

With regards to a conceptual framework underpinning the study, I adopt a person-centred approach in reference to Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) Person-Process-Context-Time Model of Development. Through this lens, I am understanding the individual as existing within influential systems, rather than attributing experiences of imaginary companions solely to cognitive capacities.

In terms of epistemology, the research is in line with a critical realist perspective which believes unobservable structures cause observable events and the external can only be understood through understanding the internal (Robson, 2011): ICs are unobservable to all but the creator but are important to the child and can influence the navigation of their life. This epistemological stance is in line with the shift from a positivist perspective which is interested in neurocognition and the nature of deficits.
3.5. Research Methods

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study due to their flexibility; autistic CYP’s ICs and paracosms is an under researched area so I wanted to allow for opportunities to explore interesting answers further with follow-up questions, and semi-structured interviews are recognised as effective at encouraging participant dialogue (Robson, 2011).

3.6. Participatory measures

I used the guidance from Autism Manchester (2017) in relation to conducting research with the autistic community, which states good practice involves several pre, procedural and post considerations including: creating an ‘expert by experience panel’, involving community members from beginning to end; actively seeking more connections with the autistic community for recruitment; taking steps to reduce anxiety related to participating in interviews and disseminating the research findings through a variety of mediums.

I sought to include autistic voices in the creation of the interview design so introduced a period of consultation before data collection with an ‘expert-by-experience’ panel. By doing this, I was able to make informed adjustments to interviews to ensure accessibility and participant comfort. The participatory measures taken in this research are expanded upon in detail within this chapter.
With regards to Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation, this measure enabled me to reach the level of ‘Consultation’.

3.7. Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants, I sought to find participants with the following criteria: aged 18 or below, has a past or current IC or Paracosm and has an Autism diagnosis.

ICs and paracosms are often a private phenomena (Pearson et al., 2001), thus it is likely the sampling process was affected by this, as many would be inaccessible through their private nature. Furthermore, difficulty with access to diagnoses as a result of assessment appointment delays, which were recorded as on average over three years in 2022 (Crane & Pellicano, 2022), would prevent participation in the research due to the sample requiring an autism diagnosis. This criteria is introduced for the rigour of the research but it is recognised as a limitation and is likely to have discounted many instances of autistic children’s ICs and paracosms which could provide further valuable learning opportunities.
3.8. Recruitment

I shared the Research Advert (see Figure 2) in online Autism parenting and support forums, on twitter and with schools in my Local Authority placement. I also contacted the 27 parents who had participated in the pilot study (Boyle, 2021) to explore whether their children might be interested in being participants.

![Research Advert](image)

*Figure 2. Research advert*
When parents responded to the advert, I then shared the CYP information and consent form (see Figure 3) and the parent information letter and consent forms (see Appendix A). Parents were encouraged to look at the child-friendly forms with their children to ensure the child/YP wanted to be a participant, alongside giving their parental consent.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 3. Child and young person information and consent form**
3.9. Participants

The sample for this research consists of eight participants, aged between 7-17. Within the sample there are two males and six females. All of the participants have an IC and/or a paracosm, as well as an autism diagnosis following a multi-disciplinary assessment. The participants had a range of additional needs, though none were reported to have experienced Developmental Trauma. See Table 1 for an outline of the participants’ profile of needs, descriptive features and geographical locations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Educational provision</th>
<th>Diagnoses</th>
<th>Parent was a participant in the Pilot Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Somerset, UK</td>
<td>Elective Home Education</td>
<td>• Autism • Anxiety</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yorkshire, UK</td>
<td>Special school</td>
<td>• Autism • ADHD</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>London, UK</td>
<td>Special school</td>
<td>• Autism • Anxiety • Dyslexia</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Surrey, UK</td>
<td>Elective Home Education</td>
<td>• Autism • Global Development Delay • Unsafe swallow</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>South Wales, UK</td>
<td>Mainstream school</td>
<td>• Autism • Sensory Processing • Auditory Processing • Visual Stress</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Descriptive features of participants

The participants were geographically dispersed across the United Kingdom and of different ages but shared many experiences and difficulties. Two attended a special school and three were in mainstream education. Three participants were electively home educated.

Three of the participants were children of parents who had participated in the pilot study (Boyle, 2021), the remainder had no prior involvement.

3.10. Phase 1: Pre-interview activity

3.10.1. Information gathering

3.10.1.1. Consultation period

I drew on the research base for guidance around best practice for holding interviews with children and young people. This supported me to plan around
checking their consent to participate remained informed and ongoing (Flewitt, 2006), introducing aspects of fun and play and providing regular breaks (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Maatta 2011). The interview method is understood to be adult-centred so adjustments should be made to make them accessible and enjoyable for children, including building-rapport, offering empathy, noticing the children's state and capacity, using simple language and allowing free play and movement throughout (Kyronlampi-Kylmanen & Maatta 2011).

There are additional potential challenges around interviewing autistic children and young people due to the nature of the diagnosis being in part underpinned by social communication difficulties and comorbid with anxiety (White et al., 2009): interviews can be anxiety-inducing experiences so it was important to seek further consultation around necessary measures and adjustments to ensure the accessibility of the interviews.

To do this, I approached several Autism Research organisations in order to create an ‘expert-by-experience’ panel for this research. I was able to hold consultations with four autistic researchers. The individuals were made aware of the purpose of their involvement through an information and consent form (see Appendix B) and the meetings were held virtually for up to one hour each. I allocated some time to share an outline of the purpose of the research and the proposed methodology, then welcomed questions and discussion. The consultations were invaluable and provided me with rich insights and practical guidance ahead of beginning data collection, much of which I would not have
considered as a non-autistic researcher. I learnt the importance of being clear about why the interview questions are being asked, using a social story within the space, building in physical activities and breaks alongside the interview questions, encouraging the participants to choose where in their home they would like the interview to take place and managing expectations with regards to how long the interview will take based on the pilot. The panel members also advised me to capture a clear breakdown of the participant’s profile of needs before holding the interviews by using a Research Passport, and offered further support by reviewing the forms and documents shared with the participants to ensure the language was accessible and autism-friendly.

3.10.1.2. Research Passports

In line with the above guidance, each participant was sent an adapted version of the Research Passport (CRAE, 2022), see Appendix C, and encouraged to complete it with support from their parent ahead of the interview. Seven out of eight participants completed the passports and I was then able to prepare each interview with reference to individual needs and interests. It was also valuable to capture the full profile of needs for each participant to ensure autism was the commonality among the sample and their imaginary activities could not be related to an incidental additional need. An extract from a passport is seen below (see Figure 4). Through learning the YP found communicating with new people ‘bad’, I was able to plan around introducing games which did not involve
the use of language early during my visit and offer a break card. I could also incorporate the interests which the children listed into rapport-building activities and visual resources.

![Figure 4. Extract from Participant 5’s Research Passport](image)

3.10.1.3. **Logistical planning**

Time was taken to carefully plan the logistics of each interview to ensure the CYP’s comfort was central to the experience. I communicated with parents and
encouraged them to extend these conversations with their children, in order to
their include their preferences. All but one participants wanted the interview to
be held in their home, the other participant preferred to meet in a public library
which they visit often. All participants also opted to have their parents present
during the interviews. Most interviews were held on weekends, between the
months of November and January 2022-2023.

It was important to plan the logistics in line with the CYP’s preferences to help
them to feel comfortable and to ensure they would be able to access higher
order thinking, as outlined by Maslow’s (1954) Hierarchy of Needs, which states
feeling safe and secure is a basic need which is necessary to be able to engage
with learning and reflection.

Including the CYP as much as possible at the early planning stage was also
important to encourage them to feel a sense of control as a participant as
opposed to a patient required to attend an appointment.

3.10.1.4. Constructing the interview schedule and procedure

All interviews were designed to follow the same structure, which is seen in the
visual timetable below (see Figure 5).
Time was allocated at the start for rapport-building which was through playing games together, I brought a selection of games with me such as Uno, question cards and Dobble, and others which did not involve the use of language, such as Connect 4. The CYP could choose a game I had or one they had in their homes. Parents were also welcome to join in the shared play session. Following this I would talk through a physical copy of the CYP information and consent form (see Figure 3) and the CYP had the opportunity to ask questions about the research, the interview and being a participant. The CYP were then asked again whether they consented to participate and signed the document upon agreeing.

Recording the interviews was then discussed in more detail and the CYP had the opportunity to do a practice recording to hear what it sounds like and
understand the function of having a recording device, before the interview recording began.

The interview questions were grouped with two breaks planned, the CYP had the choice over how to use these breaks and could add more breaks if desired. I was also aware of individual needs from the Research Passports so could tailor how breaks were considered with each participant.

Each participant was asked the same 26 interview questions which were reviewed by the ‘expert-by-experience’ panel. However other questions were posed to each participant in response to their answers, in line with the semi-structured interview format. I drew on my therapeutic skills and Educational Psychology training around effectively capturing CYP views in the interviews, which at times meant reflecting back what they had told me previously and this is seen at times in the quotations presented in the results chapter.

Upon completion of the interview questions, I allocated more time for shared play before ending the interview and punctuating the experience with ceremony in the form of giving the children certificates and stickers. This was a valuable component of the interviews: all participants, including the older young people, were pleased to be the focus of these ending activities. The psychology considered beforehand is expanded upon later in this chapter.
3.10.1.5. **Resource development**

I created several resources before beginning the interviews to support with their accessibility. Children and young people with social communication needs often benefit from the use of visuals to support with their comprehension and communication (Tissot & Evans, 2010). This is a provision I recommend often in my role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist and it felt important to translate this aspect of good practice into the research interview space.

Figure 5 shows the visual timetable which was used to illustrate the structure of the sessions. Figure 6 shows the interview questions printed and separated so the CYP could refer back to each and see a visual representation of how many questions were completed and remaining.

![Printed interview questions](image)

*Figure 6. Printed interview questions*
Figure 7 shows a 'break card' which the CYP could touch if they wanted a break but did not feel able to communicate this verbally.

![Image of break card](image)

*Figure 7. Image of break card used*

Figure 8 shows the certificate template I created to give each participant at the end of the interviews. Participant 1 who underwent the pilot interview also received a letter, seen in Figure 9.
Figure 8. Template for participant certificates

Figure 9. Letter for participant 1 following Pilot interview
3.10.2. Information sharing

As well as the information and consent forms, I sent several resources to further support the participant's certainty over what to expect, thereby increasing their sense of control and reducing their anxiety.

3.10.2.1. Information about me

Figure 10 shows an ‘One Page Profile’ sheet which I sent to each participant before meeting them. One-page profiles are a useful tool to facilitate person-centred practice and are often used across education, health and social care professions (Vingerhoets & Wagner, 2016).

Figure 10. One Page Profile about the researcher
This felt important to do in order to promote equality of information sharing and transparency, as the interviews would be exposing for the participants by nature. In allowing them to know more personal information about me, I hoped to restore some balance in power within the researcher-participant relationship dynamic. This imbalance is particularly important to consider when conducting research involving children (Thomas & O'Kane, 2006).

3.10.2.2. Videos

I also sent participants a video of me talking which they could watch before meeting me. The individualised videos were up to three minutes in length, included subtitles and consisted of me introducing myself, confirming the time, date and location of the interview, outlining the plan for our time together and expressing that I was looking forward to meeting the participant and learning about the ICs/paracosms. Figure 11 shows a screenshot from a video.
I made these videos to further support the participant's certainty around what to expect and specifically what to expect from me, an unknown person they were meeting for the first time. The participants could get a sense of how I looked and talked so those were no longer aspects about the day which could be unpredictable.

3.10.2.3. Interview questions

The final document I shared ahead of the interviews was a list of the interview questions for the CYP to peruse and reflect on beforehand (see Figure 12). This was shared with a caveat about the interviews being semi-structured so other questions may be asked alongside these, which would definitely be asked.
This limited uncertainty around the interview itself as much as was possible and the CYP could feel prepared for the questions. There is limited research around this practice, though it has been suggested that seen examinations can be an unreliable method of assessment, due to the individual’s greater propensity to draw on external references while preparing their response (Brown & Knight, 1994) However, with this in mind and against the context of ICs and paracosms being very individual experiences, I made the decision to share the questions in favour of prioritising the CYP’s ability to remain regulated and access the interviews, over hearing their spontaneous thoughts.

Figure 12. List of interview questions
3.11. Phase 2: Interviews

3.11.1. Pilot interview

I held the first interview as a Pilot with the participant’s knowledge. Additional time was allocated at the end to reflect on the interview questions and the YP’s experience of being a participant.

The young person suggested one question to add to the interview schedule but otherwise thought the questions were all easy to understand and captured all important aspects of their experiences with their ICs and paracosm. The young person also told me that the pre-interview activity was significantly helpful in enabling them to feel comfortable in the lead up to the interview and when meeting me, as they were less nervous than they would have been typically. The young person said the video of me talking, seeing the questions beforehand and a clear schedule were particularly important factors contributing to their reduced anxiety.

Holding a pilot interview was valuable for this feedback and I added the additional question into the interview schedule. Pilots allow the researcher to learn of any problems related to converting a design into reality and should be done in virtually all circumstances, according to Robson (2011). However, in my study each interview experience remained tailored to the individual CYP’s
needs, in line with guidance from the consultation period and information gathered from the Research Passports.

3.11.2. *Conducting the interviews*

Some of the interviews involved significant travel and I had to plan carefully around this in order to stick to the arrangements expressed to the participants. Upon arrival, several of the participants were anxious, not able to speak to me and told their parents beforehand they did not want to do the interview. It was helpful for parents to share this information with me when I arrived and I was able to engage all of the participants through play and letting them know we could just play and I would leave after the game if that was what they wanted.

All participants were able to engage more with me following a shared play activity: shared play encourages engagement and a sense of connection with the play partner (Goodacre et al., 2023). After the games, I went through the information and consent forms with the participants to check their understanding of what participating entailed to ensure they still wanted to participate now I was in their home, as they had previously agreed without the heightened anxiety being as much of a factor. There was time to go through the forms and answer the CYP’s questions relating to all aspects of being a research participant. The children generally did have further questions in relation to what happened to their information, and this provided a good opportunity to discuss confidentiality.
at length using child-friendly language. All of the children were curious about being recorded so they also had the opportunity to do a practice by recording themselves speaking for five seconds then listening back to it. All of the CYP enjoyed doing this and it appeared to support their capacity to offer consent which was fully informed.

Gillick Competence (1984) as a measure of a CYP’s capacity to consent does not generally consider the role of mediated learning and supporting CYP’s capacity to learn, rather it offers a binary view as to whether capacity exists or not and if not, consent is relayed to parents or caregivers. Mediation is about continuing to find novel ways to teach a concept until the CYP can grasp it; the focus is on the adult’s teaching rather than the CYP’s capacity for learning (Feuerstein et al., 1991). This was a valuable approach to support the participant’s ability to offer consent and protect their autonomy as research participants, alongside having parental consent. All participants consented to the interview in situ and felt comfortable doing so knowing they could change their minds at any point.

During the interviews, regular breaks were taken. Children then had the choice to follow their own agenda, but they often wanted to include me in these breaks by showing me their favourite toys, activities or spaces around the house. The children responded well to me showing interest in their lives, recognising their strengths and promoting their sense of agency over the situation. This appeared to support our rapport-building and the CYP wanted to include me in further play
and conversation. Key features of educational psychological practice have been identified to include employing effective interpersonal skills and being able to build meaningful rapport with service users quickly (Cameron, 2006); the translation of these skills appears highly beneficial when conducting research interviews with children.

I brought a selection of sensory toys with me which also supported with the CYP’s ability to remain regulated throughout the periods in between breaks which were focused on the interview questions. Furthermore, as learnt through the Research Passports, several of the participants had a diagnosis of ADHD as well as autism. Research from Murray et al. (2009) states sensory tools can support with attention skills by meeting movement needs as well as by their regulatory function. In this way, a benefit of using the Research Passport was being able to support needs related to other difficulties and diagnoses.

All participants attempted each interview question and shared they enjoyed the experience of the interview when asked at the end, despite several having felt reluctant on my arrival. The participants all received the certificate and a sticker at the end of the interview and could keep one of the sensory toys I had brought, which they were pleased about. Each interview lasted between 1-1.5 hours, depending on how many breaks were taken.
3.11.3. **Role of parents**

The parents ended up playing important roles throughout the data collection phase, with communication through the pre-interview activity but also in the interviews themselves. All children wanted their parents to stay with them when given the choice, indicating their parents provided them with a sense of safety which supported their participation. Additionally, some parents supported the CYP’s thinking in the interview space by offering prompts. I was clear that if parents answered questions in place of the CYP I could not include this information as data but I accepted parents prompting their child’s thinking and remembering as a helpful activity to extend the CYP’s reflections.

One parent, however, took a more active role in the interview, in partnership with a personified object (PO). Participant 6 has been diagnosed with Selective Mutism and the parent had told me it was possible she may find it challenging to talk at all during my visit if she was feeling anxious. We discussed the option of writing answers which the parent thought the YP might find easier to engage with, however, the YP did not want to write her answers but started using her PO to communicate this by shaking its head for ‘no’ and nodding its head for ‘yes’. The parent and I were able to problem-solve and we contracted reasonable adjustments to the interview in the form of the parent interpreting the PO’s communication, then using the PO to check the YP’s views, but not offering their own views into the answers. Through this unique method the YP
was able to access the interview and share her views, in a way which was comfortable for her, with careful contracting as to ensure the validity of the data collected.

3.11.4. Endings

I made sure to allocate time for a ceremonious ending with each participant. Considerable thought is given prior to ending therapeutic relationships as it is known they can arouse deep seated anxieties and a sense of loss (Wittenberg, 1999). While the context of these relationships was a research interview not a therapeutic intervention, I still felt it was important to honour the relationships built with each young person over a short period of time and support any challenging emotions they might have experienced about that ending. I adopted a person-centred approach in the interviews in this way, holding in mind the CYP’s experience of the interview as central and protecting against any sense of loss of relational safety, particularly as these children may struggle with social relationships in line with their autism diagnosis.

The certificates were an important element of marking the end of the interview and were mentioned on the visual timetable (see Figure 5), the video (see Figure 11) and the One Page Profile (see Figure 10) to illustrate that this would be the final activity. I read out the writing on the certificate to each participant then we both signed our names. Doing this as a ceremony in the space also
allowed me to be flexible with the detail on the certificates, for example, Participant 6 who was diagnosed with Selective Mutism and communicated her views through her parent and PO agreed she wanted the PO’s name to be included on the certificate too and we were able to do this.

I offered short wellbeing check-ins with the participants using emotion cards (see Figure 13) to check in with how they were feeling at the end of the interview. This was similar in nature to the reflection period at the end of the Pilot interview but without the focus on the questions asked.

Some participants told me they found the interview difficult but all said they were happy they did it and all parents reported feeling proud of their child. Several

Figure 13. Image of feelings cards used (Therapeutic Treasure Deck by Dr Karen Treisman)
parents told me they did not believe their child would be able to engage based on their presentation upon my arrival; including the parents in these check-ins supported them to connect with their child and express positive emotions towards them ahead of my leaving which also supported the ending of my involvement.

As a final activity, the participants could choose a sticker and one sensory toy to keep with them from my collection. I planned this with the theory of transitional objects in mind: Winnicott first introduced the term ‘transitional objects’ in reference to comforting items for a child which can support with the sense of connection to a person and reduce the sense of loss upon their separation (Winnicott, 1953).

3.12. Data Analysis

3.12.1. Reflexive Thematic Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, I used Thematic Analysis with the data due to having a heterogenous sample, yet wanting to analyse and interpret patterns across the participants’ unique experiences with ICs and Paracosms. I decided to use Braun and Clarke’s Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) due to the value placed on active and critical reflection on my role as the researcher, as well as its interest in searching for meaning in the dataset.
Reflexive Thematic Analysis involves six phases: familiarisation with the data; coding; initial theme generation; theme development and review theme defining, refining and naming and, finally, writing up. This process is not designed to be linear and I found myself going back to phases 1 and 2 several times upon reflection that I was more likely to see and develop themes which seemed related to the findings from my pilot study (Boyle, 2021). Re-immersing myself in this dataset and going through all codes and initial themes multiple times with reflexivity supported my ability to remain fully focused on this dataset. In addition, I kept a reflective diary throughout the whole data collection and data analysis period.

I counted occurrences of codes to develop cluster themes and then reviewed these to create overarching themes. See Appendix D for an example of how an extract of data was coded and how the codes correspond with the developed overarching theme.

3.12.2. Creating a Thematic Map

During phase 5 of Reflexive TA, I made a Thematic Map. Thematic Maps are used to visually support the interpretation of data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I started by creating individual maps for each theme to ensure the cluster themes fit into each overarching theme framework, before fitting it all together as themes
of the entire dataset. The thematic map for this dataset can be seen in the results chapter which follows.
Chapter 4

4. Findings

This dataset is incredibly rich and each child’s IC/paracosm is highly individual.

To outline this and honour each experience, I begin this chapter by presenting
an overview of the descriptive features of each CYP’s IC/paracosm.

However, the Thematic Analysis was successful in identifying clear patterns
which have been developed into four overarching themes. Each theme is
considered in detail in this chapter with quotes from interview transcripts to
illustrate them.

4.1. Descriptive features

This outline of each IC/paracosm demonstrates not only the wide variety but
also the similarities across some of the participants’ creations in terms of
characteristics and features.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Schooling</th>
<th>Past or Current IC/Paracosm</th>
<th>IC/PO/Paracosm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1           | Female | 15  | Electively Home Educated (previously Mainstream School) | Past | • 3 ICs
  o Small dog-like creature called Bip
  o Fairy/Unicorn creature called Midnight
  o Dragon called Alex
• 1 paracosm
  o Imaginary world called Dragonlandia
  o Language spoken = Dragonese
  o Events happen such as the Dragon Olympics
  o YP role = Dragon Trainer |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Current</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 2 | Female | 13  | Special School | Current | • About 20 ICs  
  - Imaginary co-worker/friend called Liz  
  - Imaginary children with additional needs  
  - Imaginary husband and 2 children  
  • 2 POs  
  - Two dolls who YP supports 1-1 at the school  
  • 1 paracosm  
  - Similar to the UK with different place names  
  - Worgun Village and Worgun City, Lexington, Sweetcorn City, Giltop, Woodfield  
  - YP takes holidays  
  - Imaginary special school called Zimpley  
  - YP role: wife, mother, part-time TA at special school (previous job as a gas engineer). |
| 3 | Male   | 7   | Special School | Current | • Multiple POs  
  - Action figure called Finn  
  - Several dog POs, one called Scout  
  - Baby doll PO  
  - All POs go to an imaginary school  
  - YP role: Looking after the POs |
| 4 | Female | 17  | Electively Home Educated (previously Special School) | Current | • Multiple ICs  
  - Imaginary husband  
  - Imaginary children with additional needs  
  • 3 POs  
  - 3 dolls who are the YP’s children  
  • 1 paracosm  
  - YP lives in a city and works at a special school  
  - YP drives and takes her children out for care and activities  
  - YP role: wife, teacher and mother |
| 5 | Female | 10  | Mainstream School | Current | • 3 POs  
  - Unicorn called Uni  
  - Bear called Bear-Bear  
  - Rabbit called Bunny  
  - YP is their sister and also teaches them at an imaginary school they attend |
| 6 | Female | 14  | Electively Home Educated (previously Mainstream School) | Current | • 5 POs  
  - Doll called Meribel  
  - Doll called Rosie  
  - Muslin called Clothy  
  - Muslin called Daddy Clothy  
  - Muslin called Mummy Clothy |
Multiple ICs
- ‘Fluffies’ who inhabit Fluffland
- 1 paracosm
  - Island called Fluffland
  - Language spoken = Fluff
  - Billboards which count down days until events in YP’s real life
  - YP role: most special person in Fluffland

- Lemur who has a family and runs a restaurant
- Citizens of the paracosm
- 1 paracosm
  - Planet called ‘Panet’
  - Countries, cities, deserts, oceans
  - Language spoken = Oopuse
  - Own food and own concept of time
  - YP role: creates things, fixes things and visits regularly

- Pet cat and kitten friends
- Allacorn (type of unicorn)
- Pegasi (type of Pegasus)
- Person called No-one
- 1 paracosm
  - Imaginary land accessed through the bottom of an imaginary backpack
  - No rules and everything is free
  - Children are in charge
  - YP role: to play and have fun

### Table 2. Overview of participants’ imaginary companions and paracosms

As seen in Table 2, five participants had a PO, six had ICs, and six had a paracosm. These are all in line with definitions of each phenomena outlined in the literature base; (Root-Bernstein, 2008; Taylor, 1999; Svendsen, 1934).

All participants had current ICs/paracosms except for 1 who described past experiences. At least eleven ICs/POs were in animal form and four paracosms featured an imaginary school.
4.2. Participant drawings

The participants were given the option to draw their ICs/paracosms at the end of the interviews. It was the last question and several participants opted not to but three participants did. Participant 7 brought some of his own drawings to help explain his paracosm and gave me permission to include them. All drawings can be seen with descriptions below:

Figure 14. Participant 2’s drawing of her and her IC Liz
Figure 15. Participant 3’s drawing of his IC Finn
Figure 16. Participant 4’s drawing of her and her imaginary husband Jad
Figure 17. Participant 7’s drawing of his imaginary world Panet
Figure 18. Participant 7’s drawing of his imaginary world Panet’s flag
Figure 19. Participant 7’s drawing of the town Pitit within his imaginary world Panet
Figure 20. Participant 7’s drawing of food available in his imaginary world Panet
Figure 21. Participant 7’s drawing of words within his imaginary language Oopuse
4.3. Themes

The data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis and as seen in the Thematic Map below (see Figure 22), four overarching themes were identified in the dataset: Control, Connection, Learning and Wellbeing.

Figure 22. Thematic Map showing the Overarching themes and Cluster themes

Figure 23 outlines each overarching theme’s corresponding cluster themes and themes. Each will be looked at individually in this section.
4.3.1. Theme 1: Control

All participants used their ICs and paracosms as a way to introduce more control into their lives. Within this theme, four cluster themes were identified; Escaping Reality, Controlled Communication, Social Justice and Empowerment. Within each cluster theme are the corresponding themes, see Figure 24 below for individual theme map.
4.3.1.1. Escaping reality

The participants largely used their paracosms as a means to escape their real lives, into a space which was safe, predictable and certain. This speaks to the challenges these CYP face in their everyday lives, as well as their resourcefulness in finding a way to access a greater sense of control through escapism.

5: My real life is so hard

K: Your real life is hard. Can you tell me a bit more?

5: It just makes me feel bad in the real life but I feel much better when I’m playing with bunny and she’s happy as well like this [makes PO dance]
4.3.1.1.1. No uncertainty

A common feature of the paracosms was their certainty. The CYP generally did not deal with surprises from their ICs or have unknown elements within their imaginary worlds.

*K: What did you like most about going into the imaginary world?*

1: Um, I liked it because it was interesting to me and it felt like normal to me. It wasn’t like, unknown cos I had control over it all...it was predictable for me.

*K: And I wonder why that predictability was important?*

1: Because it was kind of a way of comforting myself rather than having everything being unknown because...well I guess it’s just part of normal life to do a lot of things that are new and to explore a lot of new things and do things that kind of push you out of your comfort zone but with an imaginary world I could just choose...so I was in control of it

Participant 1 was able to reflect on the comfort she found in the predictability of her paracosm, as opposed to having to face new experiences and change often in her real life. Participant 1 also recognised this aspect of her paracosm as one she chose in order to gain a sense of control.

*K: Does Clothy ever surprise you by saying something or doing something? (PO shakes head)*

6: You’re very predictable, aren’t you Clothy (PO nods)
K: Okay. Have any of your imaginary friends ever really surprised you and done something unexpected?

6: (PO shakes head) No

Stability was a common characteristic amongst the participant’s ICs. Participant 6 acknowledges the predictability of her ICs and this is understood to be a positive trait.

4.3.1.1.2. **No pain/loss/discomfort**

Several of the paracosms appeared to be safe havens for the CYP, excluding aspects of their real lives which they found particularly challenging. The participants appeared to find it difficult to tolerate certain forms of pain, loss or obligation, thus created an imaginary world where they did not have to face these at all.

4: I can just get away from my real life

K: Yeah.

4: And go into my imaginary world

K: Yeah. And do you think that sometimes it’s even more special because your real life is hard or you don’t like it?

4: My real life is hard and full of appointments and…

K: What is it that you find difficult about your real life?

4: Hospital appointments

K: You don’t like the appointments?
4: No I hate them

K: So when you have appointments, do you think more about your imaginary world?

4: Yeah.

K: So do you spend more time thinking about it when you have to go to hospital?

4: Yeah

K: And then how does it help you? How do you feel then?

4: Calm

Participant 4 describes escaping to her paracosm at times which she finds especially uncomfortable. The desire to get away from reality holds the implication that her real life is hard and her paracosm is easy, which is supported by her explanation she feels more calm when she is in control and comfortable in her imaginary world.

K: And do you think that Clothy is a girl or a boy or something else...or maybe you’re not sure?

6: She’s a girl. But there’s no periods in Fluffland are there Clothy? No, absolutely not.

(PO shakes head exaggeratedly)

We don’t have to have periods because we don’t like them

K: Yeah, you don’t like them.

6: They’re painful, they’re horrible, we don’t like them (PO shakes head)

Participant 6 has created a paracosm in which menstruation does not exist, as periods are something which bring her discomfort in her real life. In this way,
Participant 6 has controlled the creation of her paracosm to exclude aspects of real life which she finds difficult.

4.3.1.1.3. Rewriting experiences

Several participants described ways in which they exercised control through creating alternate endings to situations which they found challenging in their real lives, including social interactions, aspects of school life and specialist provision.

4: Yeah, it's just my gastrodarling also goes to a pretend respite centre for a couple of weeks.

K: Oh she goes to respite, when you're away?

4: No, just general.

K: Oh okay and have you done that as well?

4: Once, didn't go very well though

K: So you didn't really like it, but does gastrodarling like it?

4: Yeah

Participant 4 noted she had a negative experience in respite care, however in her paracosm she is a caregiver to a disabled child and made the decision to send her to respite. Despite it being a challenging experience for the young person, her imaginary child was reported to like respite care. Participant 4 has introduced this activity into her paracosm in a safe and controlled way, and been able to rewrite her experience through the IC.
4.3.1.2. Controlled communication

Many of the participants also introduced elements of control into their imaginary social communication, in order to make it more comfortable and accessible for them. The two main ways of doing this were by using ICs to communicate their real needs and by designing ICs who were straightforward and transparent in their interactions with the CYP.

4.3.1.2.1. Uncomplicated social interactions

All participants described relationships with their ICs which were positive and appeared to involve a degree of simplicity. The ICs were generally kind, agreeable and consistent, providing limited scope for the CYP to feel confused or hurt. These characteristics appear to be chosen deliberately by the participants in order to feel a sense of control over the relationships and interactions.

K: What were the relationships like with your imaginary friends compared to your relationships in real life at the time?

1: Um, they worked better. They made more sense to me, they were less likely to be...I mean I don’t think I ever had arguments or like conflicts or um, like I don’t think I was ever confused by my imaginary friends’ actions because I was just in control of it so I could just make sense of it. Like in the same way you’d write a story and like...it wouldn’t make sense or go off on irrelevant points or something cos you could just direct it
towards whatever you want it to be. Whereas in real life obviously I have a lot less control over what other people think of me and what other people...like the way they interact and the way they interpret my own actions and stuff as well is obviously not all predictable and I can’t just control that very much

Participant 1 describes the factors of real-life social interactions which can be confusing and challenging for her, and explains her relationships with her ICs did not involve these factors through her being in control of them.

4.3.1.2.2. Communicating needs

Three participants described ways in which their ICs were used to communicate the CYP’s needs. This appeared to be a safe way to express themselves, through controlling the delivery of the statements and removing the focus from themselves.

K: So what does bunny talk about? What does bunny say?
5: Lots of things
K: Can you give me an example?
5: Um, like ‘I’m hungry’ and then that makes me hungry
K: Oh so first bunny will say I’m hungry and then when you hear it you think actually I’m hungry as well?
5: Yes
Participant 5 explained her PO states it is hungry which often triggers her to acknowledge that she is hungry as well. The CYP seems to be using her PO to support her own ability to recognise, name and communicate her needs.

4.3.1.3. Empowerment

All of the participants appeared to use their ICs and paracosms in various ways to feel empowered. Many of the CYP have complex needs and require a high level of support, yet gained a greater sense of control over their lives with their ICs and within their paracosms by placing themselves in roles and scenarios which allow them to feel valuable and autonomous.

4.3.1.3.1. CYP important to ICs

Most of the participants placed themselves in roles which are important and meant their ICs depended upon them, emphasising their value.

4: And he is my little favourite child.

K: And he's your favourite child. So what makes him your favourite out of all of them?

4: He just cuddles me and loves me

K: You love the cuddles and you feel like he really loves you. And do you feel like that with the other ones?

4: Yeah.
Participant 4 describes the love felt towards her by one of her ICs in particular, and mentions this IC is also her favourite. This indicates the sense of being loved and valued by the IC is equally important to the CYP.

4.3.1.3.2. Autonomy and independence

All of the participants lived independent lives within their ICs and did not rely on others for care or provision. Participants had jobs, looked after others, travelled freely and attended events within their paracosms.

Participant 2 explains she travels independently around her paracosm and is able to drive. This Participant is aged 13, attends a special school and receives a high level of adult support in her real life.
4: Yes, I've got a job.

K: What's your job?

4: I work at a special needs school

Participant 4 also requires a significant amount of 1-1 support in her real life but is able to experience independence through the form of employment in her paracosm, as described by her explaining the function of having a pretend phone.

4.3.1.4. Social Justice

Many of the IC’s and paracosms appeared to reflect the CYP’s strong value of fairness. Features of equality and inclusivity were common, indicating the participant’s difficulty tolerating inequality and their proclivity for social justice. This was particularly prevalent in the participants’ constructions around the distribution of wealth and privilege.

4.3.1.4.1. Equality

All of the paracosms included features of equality; they appeared designed as not to disadvantage anyone, alongside serving the interests of the CYP.
6: Everybody's paid the same because we were talking about strikes and how the post office was in Strike, the post people. She said that wouldn't happen in Fluffland because everybody gets the right amount.

K: So it feels very fair, and I suppose you don't have to tolerate a lot of the discomfort about things not feeling fair (PO shakes head)

6: No everybody's well in Fluffland, everyone's happy. There's no sickness. Everybody's happy, aren't they? (PO nods)

With support from her mother and her PO, Participant 6 acknowledges her paracosm is a just world in which everyone is happy and treated fairly.

8: I would get to have as much sweets as I want and not get sick

K: You never get sick. And who else is there, who are you having all this food with?

8: My imaginary friends

K: Just your imaginary friends? And what do they do when they're there? Do they eat nice food as well?

8: Yeah, they can have whatever they want. Everything's free.

K: Everything's free in your imaginary world?

8: Yes

Participant 8’s paracosm involves no form of currency, meaning everything is free and no ICs are therefore disadvantaged by the experience of poverty.
4.3.2. Theme 2: Connection

Relationships were a central feature to all of the participants’ engagements with their ICs and paracosms. The ICs were used to meet the CYP’s needs for connection which appeared unmet in other areas of their lives. Through their ICs, the participants were able to access a sense of relational safety, remedy experiences of isolation and gain a curated sense of belonging.

![Individual Thematic Map: Theme 2 - Connection](image)

**Figure 25. Individual Thematic Map: Theme 2 - Connection**

4.3.2.1. Meeting social needs

All of the participants presented as connection-driven yet struggled with making and maintaining relationships in their real lives. All of the ICs were regarded as
special relationships to the participants, and these connections were central features within all of the paracosms.

### 4.3.2.1.1. Friendship difficulties in real life

It was clear that social interaction difficulties made peer relationships challenging for 7 out of 8 participants.

*K: What are the relationships with your imaginary friends like compared to your relationships in real life?*

6: Much better in the imaginary world. You don't really have friends in real life, do you?

(PO shakes head) You've said that lots. She finds people very unpredictable (PO nods)

Participant 6 acknowledges she has no experiences of friendship in her real life, in part due to finding peers unpredictable. Participant 6 therefore favours her imaginary relationships.

### 4.3.2.1.2. Socially motivated

Despite friendship difficulties experienced by almost all participants, it was evident that the CYP wanted friendships. It appeared the participants used their ICs and paracosms as a means to meet their need for connection in a way which was accessible and comfortable for them.
K: It sounds like when you were younger it wasn’t that you didn’t want friends or you chose to play with imaginary friends because you weren’t interested at all, but it sounds like it was a bit tricky...

1: Yeah definitely not. I did want friends I just didn’t relate to other people enough to make friends really and when I did make friends, I don’t think they were real true friends. Like they were good friends towards me but at times they weren’t as well. So while I had...I wasn’t like completely alone but none of the friends I had and the people I knew were amazing either. They were just yeah...

Participant 1 recognises she wanted to experience friendships when she attended school but struggled with some aspects of social interaction and with trusting others’ intentions. This appeared to be challenging for Participant 1 because she wanted to experience close and supportive relationships with peers.

K: How would you feel if you didn’t have your imaginary friends?

4: Lost. Because I have loads of things happen to me and I just don’t have anyone to talk to, even though I have got my mummy, of course.

Participant 4 indicates she wants to connect and share her difficulties with others outside of the family network but does not experience this through friendships so uses her ICs instead.
4.3.2.2. Sense of belonging

Most of the participants used their paracosms or their relationships with their ICs as a space where they fit in, feel accepted and valued. It was possible to interpret that these participants struggled to access this sense of belonging in their real lives.

4.3.2.2.1. Feeling understood

All participants appeared to feel a special connection with their ICs through being understood and accepted by them. The CYP did not feel judged or criticised by the ICs, instead the ICs all seemed to have a deep knowledge of the CYP’s internal world and viewed them favourably.

6: You’ve never had a problem with being friends with clothy. No Because clothy understands owner more than anybody (PO nods exaggeratedly)
K: Yeah. Does it feel easier because they’re not going to surprise you or say something you don’t like?
6: No, clothy wouldn’t do that. Clothy just gets [YP NAME]. Don’t you clothy? (PO nods)

Participant 6 recognises her feeling understood by the PO as a contributing factor towards their close friendship. The PO appears to adapt their behaviour and communication in line with understanding what the CYP responds best to.
4.3.2.2.2. Feeling special

Most of the participants shared examples of how they are valued by their ICs. These anecdotes held indications of how the CYP want to be treated and made to feel by people in their lives.

*Participant 4 recalls various acts of service from her imaginary husband which provided her with access to feeling special and valued by someone else.*
4.3.2.3. Alleviate loneliness

Most of the participants described ways in which their ICs and engaging with worldplay more generally could alleviate feelings of loneliness and isolation. These experiences of loneliness are likely related to the CYP’s unmet needs for social connection.

4.3.2.3.1. Companionship

A feature of all of the ICs was their readiness to engage with the participants and join in with play, reflection, activities and worldplay. In this way, the ICs can be viewed as constant companions for the CYP.

K: *What would be different if you didn't have your imaginary friends?*

3: *What about if I didn't have imaginative friends? I would be alone and I'll be sad.*

K: *Oh, you'd be alone and you'd be sad*

3: *Yeah*

K: *So because you've got your imaginary friends, you never feel alone*

3: *Yeah*

Participant 3 explains the companionship offered by his POs alleviates loneliness and unhappiness.
1: Um I haven’t really thought about that. Alex and Bip were both quite...they weren’t full on but they were quite enthusiastic and probably like, willing to do stuff with me all the time like if I wanted to do something Bip would do it with me or Alex would do it with me um...

*K: Do they sometimes say to you things like ‘I don’t want to do that’?*

5: No they love doing the things I suggest

Participants 1 and 5 both describe ICs who are eager and consistent in their enthusiasm to follow the CYP’s interests and engage with them.

4.3.2.3.2. Inclusive

The ICs and paracosms are curated in a way which engenders inclusion for all of the participants, as opposed to many people, spaces and scenarios in their real lives which can make the CYP feel excluded.

*K: So it sounds like it just kept you engaged and interested you*

1: Yes and it probably made me feel less lonely as well because I had like, friends…and things to do so it felt like I was actually interacting in an environment that was made for me rather than just being excluded and feeling like I was viewing things from an outside perspective. And I was able to actually engage in the things that I did in my imaginary world whereas with real life it just felt like I was on the outside of all the like, friendship groups and all the trends and everything like that…
Participant 1 describes the inclusive nature of her paracosm and notes how this contrasted to her experiences of inclusion in real life. In this way, the ICs and paracosm were designed to meet her needs.

4.3.2.3.3. Confiding in ICs

Most of the participants shared that they confide in their ICs, often telling them things they would otherwise keep to themselves.

*K: What do you talk about with your imaginary friends?*

5: Um I talk about my feelings

*K: So you talk to them about your feelings... is this all in your head or sometimes do you actually talk to them?*

5: I always actually talk to them

*K: And you tell them how you’re feeling...*

5: Yeah

*K: What do they say?*

5: They say oh well I’m feeling the same as you

Participant 5’s ICs validate her feelings when she confides in them and state they feel the same, alleviating any isolation in her experience of her emotions.
K: What do you talk about with clothy?

6: All the things. Things that you haven't told anybody else, Clothy knows secrets to even I don't know. Don’t you Clothy? (PO nods)

K: Clothy is someone you can tell secrets to

6: (PO nods) Yes.

Participant 6 shares things with her IC that she does not confide in anyone else. Being able to share secrets with her IC appears to strengthen their relationship as well as alleviate her loneliness.

4.3.2.4. Relational safety

All of the ICs allowed the participants to feel contained, supported and safe to be themselves within the relationships; the CYP could experience relational safety with their ICs.

4.3.2.4.1. Protection

Many of the ICs were driven to protect the CYP, both physically and emotionally.

K: So she likes doing gymnastics, is there anything else she likes doing?

5: She likes protecting me

K: Protecting you, so she keeps you safe?

5: Yeah
K: And what about uni and bear-bear do they protect you as well?

5: Yeah those are my school teddies

Participant 5 reports protectiveness as a key characteristic of her PO and suggests different POs keep her safe in different environments.

4.3.2.4.2. Unconditional positive regard

All participants were able to access relational safety through their ICs providing them with unconditional positive regard; they consistently treated the CYP with kindness and care.

K: Is there anything else that Clothy loves?

6: Oh, my goodness. She adores her owner don't you.

K: What do you think, Clothy? (PO nods) Do you adore owner? (PO nods exaggeratedly)

6: Well, it's because you're so beautiful. It's only when I say things to (YP) like, oh, my goodness, you're so beautiful. You're so lovely, Clothy comes alive, don't you? (PO nods exaggeratedly)

K: Oh I can see it makes Clothy really happy

6: Makes Clothy really happy. And then Clothy will say of course she is. Of course she is. Don't you Clothy? Like I'm stupid. (PO nods and YP smiles)

K: Because Clothy believes you're the most beautiful owner ever (PO nods and YP smiles)

6: Clothy believes wonderful clothly owner is the fluffiest owner that's ever lived, isn't she?
(PO nods exaggeratedly)

K: I wonder how that makes owner feel then?

6: Does that make you feel good? (PO and YP nod)

K: Yeah?

6: Because too often you've had lots of people say non Fluffy things that make you not feel good. And the non Fluffy things stick in [YP NAME]'s head for a long long long time and…

K: Make you not feel good?

6: Feel terrible and affect her mental health. So Fluffy like clothly likes to hear all…in Fluffland and all the fluffies say nice things about owner, don't they? (PO nods)

K: Yeah. And do they say nice things every day to you? (PO nods) Yeah. That's lovely.

Participant 6 acknowledges her PO holds her in very high regard and offers her unconditional love and affection. Participant 6 was able to recognise this treatment is in direct contrast to how she has been treated by others in her real life.

4.3.2.4.3. Predictability

Predictability was a characteristic of all ICs and paracosms and supported the CYP's ability to feel safe as well as in control.

K: Ok for this question if you can imagine a scale from one to ten and if I say how special are your imaginary friends to you and 1 is not special at all, ten is most special ever and 5 is medium special, what would you say?
5: ten billion

K: *Really, so they’re ten billion special, so what makes them that special to you then?*

5: Cos they’ve always been there for me

K: *They’ve always been there for you, and are there some people that haven’t always been there for you?*

5: Yeah

K: *Really, what do you mean, like friends?*

5: Yeah friends

Participant 5 explains consistency is important for her to feel safe in the imaginary relationships. It is clear Participant 5 values the predictability in their connections as it is the key feature she highlights to explain what makes the relationships feel so special to her.

K: *So you’ve known Jad for a long time then, has Jad changed in the time that you’ve known him?*

4: No he’s the same

Participant 4 has had an imaginary husband for six years and she reports he has not changed over this time period. Participant 4 has designed her IC to be a predictable figure in her life.
4.3.3. Theme 3: Learning

All participants used their ICs and paracosms as a tool to help them make sense of experiences, process change and new situations, and learn about their values and what is important to them. Additionally, an interesting finding related to learning about the self, specifically in relation to the participants having additional needs and how they made sense of this.

*Figure 26. Individual Thematic Map: Theme 3 – Learning*
4.3.3.1. Identity development

Almost all of the participants explored their sense of self through their ICs and paracosms. Several did this through transposing their own feelings and experiences to their ICs, as well as making sense of additional needs more generally through their ICs.

4.3.3.1.1. Externalisation

A lot of the ICs has the same characteristics, experiences, likes and dislikes as the CYP; the participants had externalised aspects of themselves to their ICs.

K: So you give them syringes and you've got medication pumps as well. So your dollies need a lot of help, don't they? And why do they need syringes and medical pumps?

4: So they can survive.

K: So they can survive. And how do you know about all of these medical things that they need?

4: I've got the same

K: You've got the same. So someone else has helped you and now you help your dollies. Okay. And are the dollies your children?

4: Yeah, they're my children.

Participant 4 explains her ICs require the same medical provision that she needs in her real life to survive.
K: And what else about bunny, is there anything that bunny doesn't like?
5: She doesn't like eating all of the vegetables just like me
K: Just like you, so neither of you like eating all of the vegetables
5: They're yucky
K: They're yucky
5: But cucumber is the best
K: Oh but you both like cucumber. And does bunny like all the same things as you as well like chicken nuggets?
5: Yes
K: Is that bunny's favourite as well?
5: Yes
K: And have you always had the same favourites or did they used to be different?
5: Always had the same

Participant 5 appears to feel an affinity with her IC through them having the same likes and dislikes as her.

4.3.3.1.2. Making sense of additional needs

Several of the paracosms included features related to additional needs, such as night carers, respite care, Local Authority accessible travel, PMLD equipment such as hoists and special schools. Many of the ICs had similar needs to the CYP though some more complex needs and disabilities also featured amongst the ICs.
K: So how often do you see Jad?

4: Not very often, because he works, but I speak to him on my fake iPhone Pro 12. We FaceTime

K: So you have calls with him… imaginary FaceTimes. And where is he working?

4: Great Ormond Street London Children’s Hospital.

K: And what does he do there?

4: He actually works on the ward that I’m actually getting my button moved down.

K: Okay, so has he helped you then before with your button?

4: Not really he just works as a receptionist

K: Oh he’s just in the same ward?

4: Yes.

Participant 4’s imaginary husband works in the hospital which she frequently visits for specialist intervention to support her profile of needs. The imaginary husband does not carry out medical care but her placement of him in employment at this specific place demonstrates her making sense of the role the hospital plays in her life.

K: Do you think it's because they can't talk that they might hit sometimes?

3: Yeah. They can't even talk yet

K: And did you tell me you used to sometimes hit people sometimes before you could talk?

3: Yeah. Oh yeah I used to bite.

K: Yeah. And what were you what were you trying to do when you were hitting or biting them? What would you have wanted to say instead?

3: Stop hitting me or you're in trouble
Participant 3 shared with me he was non-verbal up to the age of four and often expressed his emotions physically, then later described his ICs as not being able to talk yet and hitting others. Participant 3 appeared to be making sense of his experiences with limited language in his early years through his ICs.

4.3.3.2. Understanding experiences

All of the participants used their ICs and paracosms to support them to make sense of certain events, experiences and their relating emotional responses.

4.3.3.2.1. Wish fulfilment

Many participants spoke about events in their paracosms and with their ICs such as attending funfairs, sports events and birthday parties. The CYP may find it challenging to participate in such events in their real lives but have safe access to them in their imaginary worlds. In this way, the participants were making sense of desirable feelings and experiences through wish fulfilment.

K: But you met online? But it wasn’t real life online it was in your imagination. Was there anyone that you met in real life online at that time? It was just in your imagination ok.
And he started by emailing?
4: Yeah
Participant 4 describes how her imaginary husband proposed to her, indicating this is an experience she desires but was able to manufacture in her paracosm instead.

Participant 7 has created a national holiday in his paracosm which is focused around fun. Participant 7 has found a way to celebrate this holiday in his real life without attending large events, though demonstrates some desire to through his mention of funfairs.
K: You can just do whatever you want, that sounds amazing. So what do you do then if you're allowed to do whatever you want?

8: Get ice cream. Get lemon ice cream. Because it exists in my imaginary land.

Participant 8’s paracosm has no rules and the CYP does not have to go to school. This is an idealistic world for the young person, indicating school is not something she enjoys and she desires to experience freedom instead.

4.3.3.2.2. Processing special school experiences

Several of the CYP used their paracosms to make sense of SEN in relation to other CYP’s additional needs, particularly those they have been exposed to through their schooling experiences.

K: Are you a TA or are you a teacher?

2: I'm a one-to-one

K: Oh, you're one to one. So do you work with someone who needs lots of help?

2: Yes

K: Really? So what sort of help do they need?

2: Annabelle and.... Annabella and Natalia.

K: So do they find learning quite tricky, then?

2: Yes, they do.

K: Really? Why do they find it tricky?

2: Because they're disabled.

K: So they're disabled and you support them one to one?
2: Yes, I do.

Participant 2 has placed herself in a 1-1 role supporting two disabled students in her paracosm. Participant 2 attends a special school but does not have a 1-1, indicating she is making sense of more complex needs and disabilities she has learnt about through her educational experiences.

K: And what’s your job when you’re there?
4: Teacher
K: Ok and what do you teach?
4: Special needs children.
K: So what help do they need then from their teacher?
4: Makaton signs, communication devices…um.
K: So you teach them to communicate with each other, and make friends?
4: Yeah
........
4: It’s all secured my school.
K: Well, that’s good, isn’t it? Keep all the children safe. That’s important.
4: Some of them run, some of them pull your own hair so I have to put my hair up at work

Participant 4 previously attended a special school and appeared to be processing some of her experiences through translating them to her imaginary school in which she is a teacher.
4.3.3.2.3. Social skills development

Several of the participants demonstrated learning around relationships and social communication skills through interactions with their ICs.

*K: So bear-bear said to you I don't like bunny?*

5: Yes but only to me

*K: Just to you*

5: Yes

*K: And what did you do then?*

5: I was like well that's a bit mean but I understand, some people just don't like other people

Participant 5 has taken on the role of mediator amongst her ICs and describes advice she has offered around social relationships and interactions, possibly making sense of relationship advice heard shared elsewhere.

*K: Did you think there was anything that I didn’t ask that I missed?*

1: Well I was interested if you’d ask the question ‘why do think you have an imaginary friend?’

*K: Yeah I didn’t ask that you’re right, do you have an answer to that question?*

1: I don’t know...I just think it’s an interesting question but I haven’t thought about it either

*K: Yeah it is...do you have any theories at all?*

1: Um, I guess like I said before it’s like a way of coming to terms of my experiences and understanding my experiences. Like the same way that you would go over a
Participant 1 reflects on how valuable her paracosm was for her to be able to make sense of social interactions and develop her friendship skills through trying out different approaches in the safety of her imagination, without harmful or hurtful consequences.

4.3.3.3. Making sense of power

Many of the participants used their paracosms as a space to make sense of power dynamics, through the roles they placed themselves and others in, aspects they chose to omit and how they conceptualised higher authority and government within their worlds.
4.3.3.3.1. Making sense of rules and consequences

Several participants spoke about discipline and consequences, often through the experiences of their ICs rather than themselves.

*K*: Yeah so does bunny still do things like that?

5: No

*K*: No? So that’s changed then, how come that’s changed?

5: Because she doesn’t like getting in trouble

*K*: Oh she doesn’t like getting in trouble

5: But she likes doing naughty things

Participant 5 demonstrates learning around rules through externalising the desire to misbehave yet pairing it with an understanding of consequence.

*K*: Are there any rules in your imaginary land?

8: No. You get to do what you want.

*K*: And does that mean it’s better than real life?

8: Yeah

*K*: What's better about it than real life?

8: You can do whatever you want. It’s quite fun.

*K*: So you're not allowed to do whatever you want in your real life?

8: No at school you pay attention to the rules. It's a rule.

*K*: You have to pay attention to the rules at school. What's that like for you?

8: It’s boring but when you go to my place it’s fun
Participant 8’s paracosm features no rules and restrictions and she makes a comparison to school in her real life, indicating her learning around following expectations within this setting and her feelings related to rules more generally.

3: Because sometimes he gets it from his friend. Me and my mom. He gets it. And then all the toys just copies

K: So they will copy each other?

3: Yeah.

K: But what does Finn get? What do you mean?

3: Trouble.

K: Oh, he gets trouble?

3: Yeah.

K: What happens?

3: He has to lie down till tomorrow morning. That's what.

K: So he gets told off when he’s a bit naughty?

3: Yep and then he goes to bed till tomorrow morning

Participant 3 demonstrates learning around rules through his account of occasionally disciplining his ICs, implying enforcing consequence upon rule-breaking is an expected act from an authority figure.
4.3.3.3.2. Liberalism

A few of the participants described their paracosms as self-policing, demonstrating some aversions to the concept of authority on a wider, societal level.

6: Clothy just keeps everything working. Don't you Clothy? (PO nods)
K: Yeah
6: Nobody gets in trouble. There's no police needed is there (PO shakes head). No.

Participant 6 acknowledges no police force are needed in her paracosm because no issues arise, seemingly a product of it also being a safe and happy place for the young person.

K: So you're not in charge in your imaginary world. No one really is. And your Lemur is the most popular, is that right?
7: Yeah, he's the most famous.
K: But you don't have a government and you don't have like a prime minister or someone in charge. So how does that work then? Because you've told me that there's not much chance of war.
7: Well, everyone is in charge of making sure everyone's safe.
K: So everyone looks after each other?
7: Yes.

Participant 7 outlines how his paracosm is self-governed by the ICs who occupy it, rejecting the idea of needing leadership to maintain citizen safety.
4.3.3.4. Processing change

Most participants used the safety of their paracosms to make sense of challenging experiences which involve change and transition.

4.3.3.4.1. Making sense of life and death

Several participants mentioned there was no ill health or dying in their paracosms, demonstrating their difficulty tolerating the idea of death yet also their learning around it conceptually; showing awareness that it is something that happens as part of life in reality.

8: They actually are quite happy.

K: Are they?

8: Yeah, they live a happy life.

K: They live a happy life. And do you think cats live a happy life in real life as well?

8: I said in imaginary land, there are no bad things, and bad things are like dying.

K: So there's no there's no dying?

8: Except for when you grow old and then you die.

K: Okay, but no one's dying when they're young. The kittens aren't dying when they're little.

8: And they have ages like us.
Participant 8’s omission of dying in her paracosm demonstrates the emotional affect the concept of death has on her at her current stage of development. However, her explanation demonstrates learning around life and death, particularly the difference between natural and accidental deaths and how she is making sense of this.

4.3.3.4.2. Acting out transitions

Many of the participants made sense of life changes and transitions through acting them out in their imaginary worlds, for example taking holidays, moving houses, changing jobs and changing schools.

K: Okay, and Liz lives in the same village?
2: No. She lives in Worgan City.

K: She’s in Worgan City. Are you moving to the same place or are you moving to different places?
2: I’m not sure. I might move to a different place not Worgan City. It depends where we find the house.

K: I see and you’re looking for a house at the moment?
2: Yeah so we could move somewhere else to a different place maybe. Or Worgan City it depends.

K: So what don’t you like about the house that you live in now?
2: It’s not big enough.

K: It’s not big enough. How do you know it’s not big enough?
2: Because we can’t really fit when people come to our house to visit us.
Participant 2 talks about her plans to move house in her paracosm, reflecting on reasons for the change and demonstrating autonomy over the decision-making process.

4.3.4. Theme 4: Wellbeing

All of the participants appeared to experience improved wellbeing from engaging with their ICs/paracosms. This was in part due to the heightened sense of control, opportunities for connection and identity development, however other subthemes were identified in the dataset which related more to each individual's personal wellbeing.

![Individual Thematic Map: Theme 4 - Wellbeing](image-url)

*Figure 27: Individual Thematic Map: Theme 4 - Wellbeing*
4.3.4.1. Play and happiness

All children said one of the things they do with their ICs is play together. It was clear that the CYP’s ICs and paracosms were positive features in the children’s lives and brought them feelings of happiness.

4.3.4.1.1. Alleviate boredom

Most of the participants indicated engaging with their ICs and paracosms prevents them from experiencing boredom in their real lives.

1: ...if I was bored or lonely or had nothing else to do at breaktime if I was just waiting for the bell to go then I would just pretend that I had imaginary friends...

Participant 1 reflected on the times she would engage with ICs at school often being related to times of boredom.

K: What would be different if you didn’t have your imaginary world?

7: I’d probably be a bit more bored

K: Yeah

7: Like my most recent drawing in my sketchbook is this one it’s Paneton poisons
Participant 7 recognises his paracosm plays an important role in alleviating boredom, offering the example of how he often spends time drawing aspects of his imaginary world.

4.3.4.1.2. Sustained attention

All of the participants’ ICs and paracosms were able to sustain their attention, demonstrated through the CYP expanding their worlds and developing their relationships over time.

1: ...I think it appealed to me a lot though so maybe it was more interesting to me than real life...probably in kind of the same way that you’d read a book and find it interesting.

Participant 1 likens her sustained interest in her paracosm to being absorbed in a book; implying the fantasy makes the reality seem dull in comparison.

K: So it is a rocket and a car all in one and it takes 2 hours to travel there.

7: Yes I get there at about eleven.

K: Yeah

7: Like just land somewhere on Panet. Normally on a desert. Then we find our way around.

K: Yeah.

7: And going but still on the rocket sea.

K: Yeah.
Participant 7 describes revisiting his paracosm regularly demonstrating his sustained interest in worldplay.

4.3.4.1.3. Special interests

Many of the participants demonstrated special interests which could permeate aspects of their ICs and paracosms.

K: But even though you had Bip for what sounds like quite a long time that didn’t get boring for you?

1: Yeah several years, probably years yeah. Up until maybe Year 3 I think. So that was starting in Reception and then later, I remember becoming...I hyperfixated on fairies and unicorns, probably because of the books I was reading at that time. So I had an imaginary horse that turned into a unicorn called Midnight. It was a black horse and it had a white star on its forehead. And that’s all I really remember. But I remember I would, like, play...riding my scooter and stuff I would pretend I was riding a horse and things like that.
Participant 1 can connect her ‘hyperfixations’ with how her ICs manifested with regards to characteristics: Participant 1 developed a special interest in unicorns then developed a unicorn IC.

2: I've got a girl and a son.

K: You've got a girl and a son.

2: One's birthday is 17 March, which is the son's birthday.

K: Okay.

2: And then the girl's birthday is the 19 May.

K: Okay, so in March and May. What years were they born in?

2: 2012. And the other one was born in 2014.

K: So let me think how old they are then

2: So one was born on the 19 May 2012, and the other one was born on the 17 March 2014.

K: Okay. And they're ten and eight. What's about your birthday? Is it the same as in real life?

2: No. Isn't the same it's the 12th of august

K: It's in August.

2: Yes it's in august

K: What about your partner's birthday, when's that one?


K: When is James’s birthday?

2: February. Yeah it’s February, the 3rd. Yeah, it's the 3rd of February. And we're both 33 years old.

Participant 2 demonstrated a special interest in dates during the interview, as seen through her being able to recall the dates of birth for all of her ICs.
4.3.4.2. Reduce anxiety

All of the CYP described their ICs/paracosms as supportive in helping them feel better when they are worried. Heightened anxiety was a shared experience among the participants, even seen through uncertainty around my involvement as a Researcher.

4.3.4.2.1. Emotional regulation

The participants could name their anxiety and describe how it reduces when they engage with their ICs and paracosms, thereby supporting their emotional regulation.

K: what would be different if you didn't have your imaginary world.

4: Disaster.

K: Disaster? What do you mean by that?

4: I get all worried and annoyed and stuff.

K: Yeah. And when you're really worried and annoyed, what's it like? How are you feeling inside?

4: Horrible.

Participant 4 describes her experience of anxiety and recognises her paracosm as having a regulatory function.
K: How would you feel if you didn't have imaginary land and your imaginary friends?

8: Empty

K: Empty?

8: I don't think anything or feel anything.

Participant 8’s paracosm appears to support her regulation through enabling her to connect with her emotions.

K: When you’re talking to your imaginary friends and telling them about how you’re feeling or what’s been happening, how does it make you feel?

5: It makes me feel better

K: It makes you feel better to tell them about how you’re feeling?

5: Yeah

.........

K: How would you feel if you didn’t have your imaginary friends?

5: I would feel very sad

Participant 5’s ICs make her feel better, implying she experiences more dysregulation in her real life and more regulation when engaging with her ICs.

K: how would you feel if you didn't have your imaginary friends?

3: A bit sad. Yeah.

K: Can you tell me a bit more.
3: If I have imagining friends, I'll be happy. If I don't, I'll be sad. If my mum wants to be imagined friends, she can say yes. And she can be my imagining friend if I don't have any.

Participant 3 acknowledges his ICs make him feel happy and without them he would experience more sadness.

K: How do you feel when you spend time in your imaginary world then?
6: Much happier. Don’t you? (PO nods). The world is a better place, but it helps you cope with everything else that's going on because it's the security (PO nods).

Participant 6 recognises her paracosm helps her cope emotionally with her real life, she feels happier when spending time in her imaginary world.

4.3.4.3. Promotes resilience

Many of the participants demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness through utilising their ICs and paracosms as a tool to cope with difficulty in their real lives.
4.3.4.3.1. Self-soothing

Reduction of anxiety was not always incidental, often the participants described actively engaging with their ICs and paracosms when they identified they were feeling emotionally dysregulated. In this way, the ICs and paracosms can be seen as a resource which develops the CYP’s resilience and ability to cope through the practice of self-regulation.

*K*: How do you feel when you’re in your imaginary world?

2: Good. I feel good.

*K*: It makes you feel good.

2: Yeah, it makes me feel good.

*K*: And in your real life, do you always feel good?

2: No, I don't always feel good.

*K*: Oh, you don’t? How do you feel sometimes in your real life?

2: Agitated, worried.

*K*: Yeah a bit agitated. And then if you're feeling a bit agitated and worried and then you go into your imaginary world, what happens?

2: I feel better.

*K*: It helps you feel better. So sometimes if you're a bit agitated, do you try and think about your imaginary world?

2: Yeah I do try to think about my imaginary world.

*K*: Can you tell me about a time when that’s happened, something that's made you feel a bit agitated, and then you started thinking about your imaginary world?

2: Jake being silly at school because Jake is silly school.
K: And so what do you do then? How do you start thinking about it.

2: Play with the sensory toys.

K: And when you're playing with the sensory toys, you start to think about your imaginary world?

2: Yes, I do.

Participant 2 describes being able to notice when she is feeling agitated then accessing her paracosm through playing with sensory toys to regulate herself.

6: She gets very worried and anxious. So she'll put Clothy up here (points to face) and go to Fluffland

K: And that's how you go to Fluffland by getting really close to Clothy? (PO nods)

6: Show how you get to Fluffland. Getting really close, getting right up to owner's face. (YP puts PO next to face)

Participant 6 has learnt to actively engage with her paracosm when she is feeling anxious by holding her PO close to her face.

4.3.4.3.2. Increased engagement through Covid-19 lockdowns

Several of the participants reported engaging more with their ICs and paracosms during the Covid-19 lockdowns, suggesting these were periods in which they experienced heightened anxiety but found ways to self-regulate through imaginary play, thereby demonstrating developing resilience.
Participant 5 states she engaged more with her ICs during lockdown to keep them safe but acknowledges she was feeling more worried at that time.

4.3.4.4. Support self-esteem

All of the participants appeared to experience a positive sense of self-esteem through their engagement with their ICs and paracosms, mainly through finding meaning and purpose through them.

4.3.4.4.1. Meaningful to CYP

The ICs and paracosms were special and important to all the participants. They appeared to add meaning to their lives and made them feel happy and good about themselves. All participants were asked to rate how important their
ICs/paracosms were to them on a scale from 0-10, below are the responses from each participant:

1: Um, maybe six and a half so quite significant

2: It's ten out of ten

3: I would say I'll give it a ten because it's special

4: Ten

5: Ten billion

6: Ten? (PO nods) ten out of ten

7: I give it nine and three quarters because it shows that I have a good imagination

8: One zero zero zero zero zero

Despite variation in experience, it is clear all the participants value their ICs and paracosms and view them as very special and meaningful. Additionally, Participant 7 could relate the meaningfulness of his paracosm to accessing a positive sense of self-esteem.
4.3.4.4.2. Sense of purpose

The ICs and paracosms provide the participants with a sense of purpose and contribute to a feeling of self-importance and value. All participants were asked who is in charge of their ICs or in their paracosms and four said themselves:

K: So who's in charge in this imaginary world? Are you in charge?
2: Yeah, I'm in charge.

K: You make all the decisions for everybody?
2: Yeah I make decisions for everything

Through placing themselves in central roles, the participants are responsible for making decisions on a regular basis and achieve a sense of purpose.

4.3.4.4.3. Caring responsibilities

Many of the CYP held roles with caring responsibilities in their paracosms or with their ICs, such as parents, carers, teachers or TAs.

K: Okay. Every day you do from ten till two, but that's part time. And how come you only do part time, have you got other responsibilities?
2: Because then I go to pick up my children from school.

K: Okay. So you have to leave at 02:00 so that you can make pick up time for your children.
K: And what schools are your children going to? Is it the same school or a different one?
2: Different one.

Participant 2 describes adjustments she has made to her employment in her paracosm in order to maintain care for her imaginary children.

K: Who is in charge of Finn and Scout?
3: Me.
K: You.
3: Because my mom can't do it because sometimes she's a bit busy
K: What do you have to do then, when your mom's busy?
3: Feed all of the dogs and chill around with the dogs and wake up and get ready. Get Timmy's food and get the poo out of his bottom.
K: Oh, you give them a good clean as well.
3: And I'm going to give him his bow tomorrow. I'm going to give him his bow.
K: So you've got a lot to remember to do.

Participant 3 outlines his routines for looking after his POs and demonstrates his developing sense of self as a caring individual.
4.4. Summary of results

All four overarching themes have been detailed in this chapter through their corresponding cluster themes. The participants in this research presented a range of different ICs and paracosms, each as individual as the creator, however many similarities in experience were found through Thematic Analysis. The participants used their ICs and paracosms to access a sense of control in their lives, make sense of challenging experiences, develop their sense of self, experience close relationships and enjoy positive wellbeing. Participant 1 captures a sense of the findings through this quote:

*K: How would you feel if you didn’t have your imaginary friends?*

1: Um, at the time I would probably have been more confused and more lonely, and more kind of, desperate because I wouldn’t have had a way to understand my own experiences.

Participant 1 has the capacity to reflect on her previous engagement with ICs and connect it to difficulties she was experiencing in relation to each theme: feeling out of control, disconnected, low and struggling to process and learn from experiences.

The ICs and paracosms support the participants’ development in multiple areas of their lives and the CYP’s experiences were overwhelmingly positive. All
participants were asked what advice they would give to a parent who found out their child had an imaginary friend and their responses are as follows:

1: Um, I don’t think you should stop them playing with their imaginary friend or imaginary world but I think they should…like ask questions and explore this child’s imaginary friend because that kind of makes them feel less lonely…like not being super intrusive or anything but just like, interacting with them rather than just them keeping in to themselves

2: It's okay.
K: You’d say it’s okay. What else would you say to them?
2: Don't worry about it.
K: Why shouldn't they worry?
2: Because it's fine. Because it's fine.
K: So what's fine about it? What do you mean?
2: I think it's a good thing

3: I think it's a good thing, madam, because I'm the kindest child in the whole world
K: And you've got an imaginary friend.
3: Yes.
K: So you're telling her don't worry, I'm very kind and I've got an imaginary friend.
3: Yeah.
K: What would you say she should do? Should they play all together with the imaginary friend or talk to it or just leave them alone to play together?
3: I think they should talk to each other.

4: I'd just say join in.
K: Join in. Why would you say that?

4: Because it is fun.

5: I would say make sure the kid is happy

K: Make sure the kid is happy, why do you think that's important?

5: Because if the kid is happy then the mum is happy


7: Well, it's their imagination. It's their imagination, you have no rule on it. Yeah you can just ask questions.

8: You should let them play with the imaginary friends. It's good for your imagination and learning.

K: Yeah, it's good for their imagination and it's good for their learning.

8: Yeah and if they didn’t have them they might struggle

These responses demonstrate how valuable and positive ICs are perceived to be by the participants; they promote engagement with ICs and encourage parents to join in and demonstrate curiosity.
5. Discussion

5.1. Summary of findings in relation to the Research Questions

5.1.1. RQ1: What are the characteristics of autistic CYP’s imaginary companions and paracosms?

The participants outlined a wide variety of different imaginary companions. Many had invisible characters with human appearances, in roles such as partners, children and friends. Some described invisible characters who were in animal form yet had human characteristics, such as their communicative capacity. The invisible animals included cats, dogs and a lemur but more often they were fantasy creatures, such unicorns, dragons, and those with features from a combination of different animals. The participants’ personified objects were a combination of animals and dolls. Majors and Baines, (2017) discovered animal ICs were found to be featured less but valued as more special, which is interesting to consider among the high number of animal ICs presented within this sample.

The participants’ paracosms came in the form of countries, planets and islands; there is variation across their features yet similarity in their complexity and detail. With regards to Silvey and MacKeith’s (1999) categorisations of paracosms into five groups: (1) toys, animals and family groups, (2) particular places and communities, (3) islands, countries and their peoples, (4) systems, documents and languages, (5) unstructured shifting and idyllic worlds, the paracosms in this
dataset appear to transverse all content groups; they cannot be easily
categorised into one. All of the paracosms featured inhabitants in the form of
animals, families or friends (ICs or POs), were situated in particular places, were
part of a larger architecture and involved their own systems and, occasionally,
languages. However, though many were idyllic, none of the paracosms were
unstructured in nature. This is possibly related to autism and finding change
challenging, as suggested by Boulter et al. (2014). This challenge around
categorising the paracosms speaks to their complexity and how much is not
known about paracosms which are created by individuals with additional needs.

Most often, the paracosms mirrored aspects of the real world but omitted
features of the participants’ lives which they perceived as difficult and
challenging. Many paracosms were idealistic in nature such as featuring no
rules, no discomfort and only positive feelings and interactions. Such
characteristics can be understood as manifestations of the ‘id’ which, according
to Freud (1968), is the part of our unconscious mind which is driven by primitive
urges and impulses. Baron (1990) explored the phenomena of ICs from a
psychoanalytical perspective to explore whether they may be revealing of
underlying needs and desires. If viewed through the same lens, some of the
paracosms in this research can be seen as a playground for the ‘id’,
demonstrating idealistic desires without the need for moderation from the
conscious mind.
Most of the paracosms included features of additional needs, such as special schools, disabled children, accessible transport and PMLD provision. Most often these features were closely connected to the CYP, for example, they held employment at the school or their imaginary child was disabled, rather than them being more speculative features of the worlds. The participants did not comment on whether they had additional needs in their paracosms but they often led more independent lives and were older in age, despite still being themselves.

Many ICs and paracosms also reflected the participant’s special interests; some autistic individuals are understood to develop particular and intense interests in certain areas (Uljarević et al., 2022) thus the imaginary worlds can be understood as a vehicle for some of the participants to further immerse themselves in and enjoy these interests through the formation of their IC and paracosm’s characteristics. In this way, the ICs and paracosms can be understood as tailored to the participant’s interests.

Additionally, the ICs and paracosms appears to be tailored to the participant’s needs: relationships with ICs were a central characteristic of the paracosms, such as with partners, children, friends, pets and anthropomorphised animals. There were no paracosms in which the CYP existed in isolation.

Some characteristics of both ICs and paracosms related to participants’ values and morality, such as fairness, inclusivity and equal responsibility for welfare.
These characteristics have not been recognised in paracosms in previous literature and could arise from this sample being autistic and the connection between autism and having a strong sense of justice, as outlined in research by Dempsey et al. (2020) which found autistic individuals can demonstrate a greater focus on rules and consequences than their neurotypical counterparts, possibly related to relatively concrete or rigid thinking.

Finally, all ICs had positive characteristics, such as kindness, having a caring nature, being funny and holding the CYP in high regard. The participants all valued both the supportive aspects and play-based aspects of their relationships with the ICs, in line with findings from research about characteristics of typically developing children’s ICs (Majors, 2013). All of the participants considered their ICs and paracosms as special and meaningful to them, which is concurrent with Major’s (2013) findings about typically developing children’s ICs and with Silvey and MacKeith’s (1999) proposition that paracosms play a positive role in children’s lives. Silvey and MacKeith (1999) also found individuals with paracosms reference the joy of the life of the imagination in contrast to the dullness of reality, which was also present among this sample; a characteristic of the paracosms were that they were often better than reality for the CYP.
5.1.2. RQ2: What are the advantages and disadvantages of autistic CYP having imaginary companions and paracosms?

The participants perceived many aspects of having ICs and paracosms as advantages; the ICs and paracosms were important to them, made them feel happy, made them feel calm and were interesting to them. Participants also felt less lonely and could escape reality.

Analysis of the data discovered advantages to the phenomenon in the form of supporting the autistic CYP’s wellbeing and aspects of their social and emotional development. Additionally, the ICs and paracosms appear to support the development of the CYP’s identity, through the different roles they can experiment with and how they make sense of their strengths and needs in a safe space. Root-Bernstein (2008) also recognised this aspect of paracosms as an advantage, stating the child who invents an imaginary world often uses it to support the development of their sense of self as a creator and the benefit of worldplay therefore lies in its inner influence upon the child. This appears to be a particularly pertinent advantage for a young person who is growing up with additional needs and developing a sense of how this forms part of their identity.

It is possible to infer an additional advantage based on interview observations in relation to the CYP and parent relationships: parents often knew intricate details about the ICs and paracosms that their CYP had confided in them about, and
the parents were often the only people in the CYP’s lives who knew about their ICs and paracosms. All CYP wanted their parent present with them in the interviews. Furthermore, the parents sometimes used the ICs to help communicate with their child or they included them in day-to-day family life. It appears the ICs and paracosms can provide bonding opportunities and support the CYP’s attachment with their caregiver.

The participants did not report disadvantages to having ICs and paracosms, however it is possible to identify some potential disadvantages based on the dataset and psychological theory. Many of the participants reported a preference for their imaginary relationships over real-life friendships and data analysis revealed the extent to which the CYP’s needs for social connection were being met through their ICs. It is possible to conceptualise the high level of engagement with ICs and paracosms as a potential disadvantage for this particular population as it is an indicator that these needs are unmet in their real lives.

Engagement with ICs among samples of typically developing children has increasingly been conceptualised as positive and it is understood ICs often complement real-life friendships (ie. Gleason, 2013; Majors, 2013; Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021). In fact, Lin (2018) suggested CYP who create ICs are often popular and highly socially competent. However, the participants in this research shared experiences of having difficulty making and maintaining
friendships and some described instances of bullying, indicating the relationships with ICs may be more substitutional than complementary.

While the ICs and paracosms demonstrate the autistic participants' resilience and resourcefulness, it is important to recognise the majority of these CYP are experiencing difficulty with navigating social relationships in their real lives and not accessing a sense of belonging and relational safety outside of their imaginary and caregiver relationships, suggesting a degree of social and emotional unfulfillment remains present. Gleason (2017) notes there are limits to relationships with imaginary companions through them not being able to provide the same feedback that engagement with real others affords. Additionally, the high level of engagement with the ICs and paracosms in turn reduces opportunities for the CYP to engage more with their real lives to remedy their unmet needs for connection.

One further disadvantage was identified in the dataset through one participant’s account of becoming electively home educated. The YP described social and emotional challenges they experienced at school and her IC was so protective over her it encouraged her to stay at home and not go to school. The YP felt supported by the IC but in this example, the IC can be considered as a contributing factor to emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA). Theory related to EBSA speaks of risk and resilience factors at play, which push the YP away from school and pull them home (Thambirajah et al., 2008) and for this YP, the IC appeared to be a pull factor which exacerbated the issue. This is one
example so does not present as a generalised disadvantage, but it is important to consider the perceived influence the CYP believes the IC has over their life, particularly when they value the imaginary relationship so highly, and how this influence can exacerbate difficulties in the CYP’s life.

5.1.3. RQ3: What are the purposes served by the autistic CYP’s imaginary companions and paracosms?

This research found overwhelmingly positive purposes served by the autistic CYP’s ICs and paracosms; a clear outcome of engagement is CYP who are developing a sense of self, making sense of their experiences, experiencing a form of relational safety, self-regulating and accessing improved wellbeing.

The ICs and paracosms were also found to alleviate boredom and loneliness, purposes found to be served by typically developing children’s ICs by Majors (2013). Majors’ research also found typically developing children’s ICs served the purpose of wish fulfilment (Majors, 2013) which was also reported among this sample, though wishes appeared to be more relational than experiential, such as to have a partner and close, supportive friendships.

Providing the CYP with a sense of control in their lives was an important purpose served by the ICs and paracosms and had previously been identified by parents in the pilot study (Boyle, 2021). However, parents did not appear to
recognise the purposes related to supporting self-esteem and promoting identity
development, demonstrating the importance of capturing individual experience
through the CYP’s voices.

The themes, seen through the Thematic Map in Figure 22, can be understood
as interactional, aspects from each relate to each other, such as escaping reality
and experiencing reduced anxiety or experiencing a sense of belonging and
improved self-esteem.

Figure 28 shows the themes control, learning and connection all contributing
towards positive wellbeing: feeling a greater sense of control, experiencing
connection and being able to make sense of experiences and of themselves can
all be understood as supporting the CYP’s wellbeing and regulation, suggesting
this is a key finding with regards to purposes served.

Figure 28. Image of Themes 1, 3 and 3 in relation to Theme 4
Furthermore, all themes can be mapped onto Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1954), which demonstrates how different needs must be met before an individual is able to access self-actualisation. Figure 29 shows how the findings from this research relate to this model and demonstrate how the purposes served ultimately contribute to positive wellbeing and enable the CYP to reach self-actualisation.

Figure 29: Image of Themes 1-4 mapped to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954)

I propose the theme of Control relates to the purpose of meeting safety needs, though this is considered a psychological need, as in this research it is conceptualised as providing a sense emotional safety and security. The CYP
used their ICs and paracosms to experience autonomy, engineer social interactions which work for them, exercise their preference for social justice, rewrite experiences and exist in a safe space away from reality which features no difficulty or exclusion.

The theme Connection serves the purpose of meeting the CYP’s relational needs by providing access to a sense of belonging, unconditional positive regard, feeling understood and ultimately meeting their unmet needs to experience close relationships.

I positioned the theme Learning as serving the purpose of meeting esteem needs due to its significant finding which relates to learning about the self, through exploring identity through the ICs and paracosms. Participants were also able to develop aspects of their self-esteem through learning about roles and social positioning and making sense of their experiences, strengths and needs.

The theme of Wellbeing is recognised here as serving the purpose of enabling self-actualisation; the realisation of one’s potential (Maslow, 1954). This is through the participant’s developing resilience, achieving a sense of purpose, engaging with their special interests, being able to sustain attention and experiencing emotional regulation.
This theoretical link outlined through Figure 29, illustrates how the themes identified in this dataset are interrelated, all feed into Wellbeing and can map onto the Hierarchy of Needs as defined by Maslow (1954) in order to serve the overall purpose of supporting the CYP’s availability for self-actualisation.

5.2. Discussion of main findings

5.2.1. The relationship between anxiety and ICs/paracosms

Experiencing heightened anxiety was a commonality amongst the sample in this research, suggestive of White et al.’s (2009) findings about the comorbidity of autism and anxiety. The ICs and paracosms were used as tools for coping with anxiety through their regulatory function and most of the participants reported feeling better and more calm when engaged with their ICs or worldplay. Some also described actively trying to engage with their imaginary worlds when they noticed they were feeling anxious. These findings are in line with the pilot study in which parents recognised a link between their autistic children engaging more with their imaginary friends and worlds when they were feeling more anxious (Boyle, 2021) and Bouldin and Pratt’s (2002) research which suggests children with ICs may experience some elevated anxiety, though it is likely there may be variation between the degree of elevated anxiety among this sample to one of typically developing children.
To better understand how the ICs and paracosms can support with anxiety regulation, it is helpful to view the themes Wellbeing and Control as interrelated. What appeared to be particularly soothing for the participants was accessing a space in which they felt a sense of control over all aspects of their lives, including how others treated and interacted with them, the autonomy and empowerment they could experience and the general lack of uncertainty and discomfort they could enjoy. Rotter (1966) developed the concept of ‘locus of control’ to explain the degree to which people believe they have control over their lives: An internal locus of control is reportedly held by those believing they have control over what happens in their life and an external locus of control is, by contrast, seen in those believing they have no control. It is therefore possible to understand the participant’s paracosms as tools to shift the locus of control from external to internal and thereby meeting their need for control. This can particularly be seen through the accounts of increased engagement during periods when the children felt most out of control. Silvey and MacKeith’s (1999) research on paracosms made reference to participants being ‘in control’ of all aspects of the world and being able to escape to a comforting place and these appeared to be important factors contributing to the participants in this research being able to feel regulated.

For this reason, there may be variation in the conceptualisation of ‘escaping’ amongst samples, as discomfort in the real world is understood to be a push factor into the private world for these participants: they appeared driven to ‘escape from’ more than ‘escape to’. This gives credence to the ubiquitous
difficulties the participants experience in their real lives, particularly in relation to navigating relationships and social interactions, dealing with change and unpredictability, lacking in autonomy and coping with sensory sensitivities. Additionally, a further aspect the participants were able to control in their paracosms was the felt social equality and inclusion, indicating this is something they do not always experience in their real lives. In this way, it is possible to draw on Bronfenbrenner’s theory of human development (2005) and recognise the systems around the autistic CYP as exacerbating their needs, such as school, peers and teachers, as well as wider societal systems and infrastructure favouring the needs and experiences of a neurotypical population. This view is also in line with the social model of disability which recognises that the needs of autistic individuals are exacerbated by barriers they face through living in a non-autistic society (Chown et al. 2017). While there may be some predisposition to experience anxiety among the sample, interview data suggests it is compounded by environmental factors, through the pull to access control and experience safety within the paracosms and imaginary relationships.

The positive impact of the ICs and paracosms on the participants’ experiences of anxiety can also be linked to the PERMA model for wellbeing. Created by Seligman (2011), the PERMA model represents five key elements which contribute to positive mental health: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and achievement. The ICs and paracosms appeared to provide the participants’ access to all of these elements; the ICs and paracosms made the CYP feel good and could sustain their interest and attention, the CYP
could experience close relationships, the ICs and paracosms were recognised as special and important to the CYP and allowed the CYP to feel a sense of accomplishment about their creations. Through this lens, autistic CYP's ICs and paracosms can be understood as supporting overall wellbeing, in part due to their fulfilment of the PERMA model components.

5.2.2. Identity and making sense of additional needs

Using ICs and paracosms to support with identity development by making sense of additional needs was an unexpected but highly interesting finding. Many features of additional needs were identified among ICs and within paracosms which prompts consideration of what it is like growing up as a child with additional needs and receiving specialist provision, in terms of how they are making sense of their identity as an individual. The participants demonstrated awareness of additional needs by including these features and it is likely they are making sense of it being something related to their experience of childhood and education.

Self-concept and identity refer to ideas about the self and definitions placed on the self; this part of the self is constructed out of meaning (Baumeister, 1999). ‘Disability identification’ is a critical factor for the developmental and logistical tasks associated with emerging adulthood according to Shattuck et al. (2014), who conducted research with 600 autistic young adults and found approximately
two-thirds (69.4%) considered themselves to have a disability or special need. This would be interesting to consider in relation to the proportion who had received specialist education provision, as within this dataset, the CYP who attended special schools appeared to explore aspects of additional needs with their ICs and through their paracosms to a greater extent than those who attended mainstream schools. This may indicate attending special schools can play a significant role in developing ‘disability identity’, which some autistic CYP can make sense of through engagement with their ICs and paracosms.

Cribb et al. (2019) explored young autistic people’s perceptions of emerging adulthood and identified developing identity as a common theme; participants described the importance of their social identity, though variation was found between feeling connected to ‘being autistic’ and wanting to be considered ‘normal’. Worldplay can be seen as part of this process, as experimenting with different roles and ascribing additional needs to other characters to make sense of them can help develop a view as to how the autism diagnosis attaches to their sense of self and informs their self-concept.

Sense-making about the self is deeply embedded in our interactions with, and perceptions of, others according to Morf and Mischel (2012). Social identity theory is based on the premise that we develop a sense of who we are based on the groups we belong to (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Many participants in this research lacked peer relationships and had experienced multiple friendship
breakdowns, suggesting these experiences may be significant in their sense-making about the self. Williams et al. (2019) explored how autistic children make sense of themselves in school settings, where many experience social marginalisation, and found many pupils make sense of themselves as being ‘different’ in relation to their typically developing peers. It is possible an autistic young person could develop a poor self-perception if their social identity develops in line with mistreatment and marginalisation. Additionally, some demonstrate difficulty in being able to develop a strong sense of identity: Baines (2012) noted some autistic pupils attempt to negotiate their sense of difference by observing and copying the behaviour, ideas and interests of TD peers to blend in and be accepted and according to Hull et al. (2017), there can be personal costs to ‘camouflaging’ including stress, anxiety and negative self-perceptions. As such, positive relational experiences with ICs may support the autistic CYP’s social identity development and can be conceptualised as protective factors against poor self-concept. Despite knowing the ICs are constructed by the individuals’ imagination, the findings in this research demonstrate they are effective in positively impacting the CYP’s emotional state and self-esteem.

Little is known about how ICs support early identity development in TD childhood. Seiffge-Krenke (1997) explored their role in developing identity in adolescence and found them to be a supportive feature, through authenticating the young people’s creative capacity and role-taking ability as well as remediating egocentrism. Egocentrism was first identified by Piaget who
explained it as a child’s inability to differentiate between the self and other, due
to seeing everything from their point of view (Piaget, 1923). This is an interesting
consideration against a background of literature which suggests a defining
feature of autism is egocentrism, as opposed to demonstrating a Theory of Mind
(i.e. Baron-Cohen, 1995). Further research is needed to understand how autistic
CYP use ICs and paracosms to support the construction of their personal and
social identities, particularly in relation to their autism diagnosis.

5.2.3. Autism and social motivation

All of the participants presented as connection-seeking. An insightful finding was
how special and important the imaginary relationships were to the CYP and
analysis revealed the ICs provided them with a sense of belonging and met their
social needs. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), we all have a universal
need to belong; a pervasive desire to form and maintain interpersonal
relationships which are lasting, positive and significant.

The Social Motivation theory posits that autism involves a fundamental
deficiency in social motivation due to a perceived relative lack in social
reward (Dawson et al., 2005). Dvash et al. (2014) expanded upon this theory
and suggested autistic individuals demonstrate low sensitivity to social
comparisons which also contributes to low social motivation.
The participants presenting as socially motivated can be understood through their attachment systems. The attachment system is one of several functionally discrete interpersonal motivational systems observed in primates that serve vital adaptive functions, such as providing intensive parental care and developing reproductive partnerships (Cortina & Liotti, 2010). Humans are born with a need to connect and the continuity of attachment seeking is guided by the individual’s internal working model as understood through attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969). Viewing attachment as a universal motivational system explains findings around the autistic CYP using ICs for belonging and relational intimacy: to meet an underlying and ongoing need to connect with others. It is also important to recognise this as a healthy aspect of attachment; none of the participants were identified to have experienced developmental trauma, thus did not present with attachment needs in relation to this.

The findings are further supported by research conducted into the higher rates of depression, anxiety and ‘other co-occurring psychiatric disorders’ within the autistic population, which notes a connection between young autistic adults self-reporting as being social oriented yet lacking in social connections (Mattys et al., 2018). These findings challenge previous research which considers lack of social motivation as an autistic characteristic (i.e. Oppenheim et al., 2019; Chevallier et al., 2012; Dawson et al., 2005), and is supported by my findings which demonstrate autistic children actively use ICs as a means to meet a need for connection. Through Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1954) and the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), both outlined above, connection can be viewed as an
essential need for positive wellbeing and self-actualisation, demonstrating the importance of the autistic CYP’s needs for connection to be met. Additionally, Roffey (2013) highlighted the importance of all CYP experiencing a sense of connectedness in the school context and stated it can act as a protective factor against exclusions.

Social motivation was also observed through my involvement as a researcher, the participants demonstrated anxiety around being participants despite showing interest in the role, and many withdrew upon my arrival. However, when offered clear structure around their participation, unconditional positive regard and made to feel special and interesting, participants became more comfortable and wanted to include me in shared play during breaks from the interview.

Majors (2013) highlighted how ICs serve particular purposes for the individuals who create them, thus when an IC is no longer needed it can be hypothesised that the purpose it is serving is no longer needed. This is also recognised through literature related to Play Therapy which states when a play theme ends, the child is likely to have processed or resolved an emotional or situational difficulty (VanFleet et al., 2010). This is interesting to consider in terms of paracosms ending: Silvey and MacKeith (1999) explored this notion in their research and the participants indicated the paracosms are simply called to mind less often over time. Within this dataset, one participant had a past paracosm and was able to reflect on the process of disengagement. The participant spoke about creating friendships online in more recent years, which was essentially her
first experience of close friendships in real life, and described simply losing interest in her paracosm over the same time period. This account indicates the participant’s need for the paracosm reduced, and ultimately ended, as her social needs began being met elsewhere. By considering the notion of engagement with ICs and paracosms ending, it is possible to ascertain the relational value of them, and thus, the social motivation of the creators.

Davis et al. (2018) researched autistic children’s ICs through parent perceptions, and highlighted differences to typically developing children’s experiences in relation to the autistic children’s ICs having less ‘well-developed’ personalities. It could be suggested this difference is related to the IC’s most important characteristics being their connection with and care for the autistic CYP, as recognised through this dataset. The ICs were designed largely to meet the CYP’s social needs and the findings speak to social communication difficulties related to autism, in contrast to social motivation difficulties. Gleason (2013) suggested typically developing CYP’s ICs can complement and enhance the individuals’ social experience. For autistic CYP, I suggest the ICs can replace this. This is supported by research which suggests autistic children may experience fewer reciprocal relationships (Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010), are often on the periphery of school social networks (Calder et al., 2013) and are more likely to experience bullying and social exclusion (Humphrey & Hebron, 2015).
Through my findings I argue there is not necessarily a motivational deficit but, rather, many autistic children experience difficulty with socially meeting the needs for connection and belonging. It is important to recognise the role of social motivation is not fully understood amongst this population and perpetuating the theory that it is absent appears harmful in light of these findings.

5.2.4. Autism and imagination

All participants demonstrated imaginative competence through their spontaneous creation of imaginary companions and imaginary worlds, a form of symbolic play. Root-Bernstein (2008) proposed paracosms are the most complex form of imaginative play in childhood and Silvey and MacKeith (1999) suggested only 3-12% of the population create a paracosm in their lifetime, yet six out of eight participants (75%) in this research presented paracosms. These findings seem improbable against the literature base and directly challenge research which connects autism with ‘impaired imagination.’

Craig and Baron-Cohen (1999) outlined an ‘imagination deficit’ amongst autistic and Asperger’s children and suggested this plays a crucial role in their impoverished creativity. However, the autistic CYP in this study demonstrated competence in imagination and their creativity can be recognised as a strength. Furthermore, the symbolic nature of play with ICs which the autistic CYP engage with appears to oppose the Theory of Mind hypothesis (Baron-Cohen, 1995).
The Theory of Mind account of autism suggests that the key social, communicative and imaginative impairments which characterise the condition result from an inability to represent mental states; i.e. not being able to interpret the beliefs, desires, intentions, likes, dislikes of another (Frith, 1994). This theory is also linked to perceived deficits in empathising, seen through difficulty in sharing affective states with others. The autistic CYP in this sample did not exist in their paracosms in isolation; their ICs were important features and were ascribed their own characteristics which the CYP interpreted regularly. Whilst the ICs are manifestations of the CYP’s imagination, they largely represented others to the CYP, who showed interest in their needs and experiences. For example, the children told me about ICs who had conflict with others, who had intentions to be naughty, who acted out behaviourally when they were struggling emotionally and who did not like being left alone. I argue that such interpretations of the IC’s mental representations demonstrates emerging empathic capacity and Theory of Mind amongst this sample of autistic CYP.

There is significant discrepancy seen between previous and current findings; autistic CYP largely presenting with an imaginative deficit compared to a high proportion within a small sample in this research demonstrating some of the most complex form of imaginative play in childhood. This presents an alarming dichotomy and holds the implication that assessing autistic children against neurotypical barometers of imagination provides inconclusive information which can be harmful to the community if shared as conclusive. The discrepancy seen
calls for critical reflection on previous research as to how this evidence of imaginative competence has not been captured previously.

As explored through the literature review, key pieces of research which outline the imaginative deficit can be scrutinised with regards to their temporal, construct and face validity, as well as their test-retest reliability. I suggest much of the research conducted in the late 20th century, which still largely informs the direction of current reasoning and research, is not person-centred and fell influence to deductive designs and the harmful use of negative hypotheses. For example, creating experiments to prove theories of imaginative and metarepresentational deficits among autistic samples without making reasonable adjustments in line with their needs. As suggested by Crane and Pellicano (2022), much of this research stems from the assumption that the way that autistic people experience and interact with the world is inherently wrong. Such research does not serve the best interests of the community and is not meaningful in being able to better understand the individual’s lived experiences.

In this research, I have been able to capture individual experiences through using a qualitative design which prioritises the CYP’s views and, as such, I am able to raise their strengths and consider how those supporting autistic CYP can ameliorate their day to day lives. This appears harmonious with Fletcher-Watson et al.’s (2019) statement that research is meaningful to the autistic community if undertaken as part of the wider agenda addressing oppressive assumptions, and in line with the overarching motivation to improve outcomes for autistic
people and those who support them. Additional features of this research that were valuable in enabling this outcome include the use of participatory measures and an inclusive design; there was careful planning around the methodological design with input from autistic researchers and care was taken to prioritise the needs of participants.

Findings from this research strongly challenge the imagination deficit narrative and it is evident that imagination in autism is widely misunderstood and misrepresented across the research base. This calls for further exploration of the phenomena through research which is inclusive in nature, qualitative in design and guided by ‘experts-by-experience’ in accordance with the ‘Nothing About Us, Without Us’ agenda (Milton, 2013).

5.2.5. Imagination theory

As a final discussion point, it is important to address the paucity in the research base with regards to paracosms; there appears to be a lot we do not know about the purposes they serve and how they relate to aspects of child development more generally. It is also unknown whether paracosms are a common feature of typical development in childhood or more prevalent among autistic CYP; these research questions do not appear to have been asked previously.
This paucity creates a gap with regards to what we know more generally about imagination. Harris (2000) expanded Piaget’s (1932) theory of early imaginative thinking in childhood to develop sustained imagination theory, stating children develop the lifelong mental capacity to consider alternatives to reality through their pretend play. Harris (2000) theorised children do this through three forms of ‘sustained role play’, which he conceptualises as a high level form of imaginary activity influencing development: imaginary companions, personification and impersonation. Impersonation can be broadly defined as where a child takes on a character for an extended period of time, often other people, animals or machines; the child is understood to be temporarily acting out the part of someone other than the self, using pretend actions and utterances (Harris, 2000).

Harris’ theory of sustained imagination does not account for the roles the participants in this research took in their paracosms. The roles were significant and different to the role the CYP has in their own life, yet the CYP largely remained themselves rather than taking on a different persona. This is interesting to consider in relation to the concept of impersonation and there appears to be a theoretical gap relating to this form of pretense.

Furthermore, Harris (2000) has speculated on autistic children’s lack of pretend play to illustrate its importance in developing certain essential functions for adulthood: Harris suggested the absence of imaginary play, as seen through
autistic children’s play, is an indication of problems and relates to their difficulties with flexible thinking, communication and social understanding, thus demonstrating the value in the activity. This parallel is rendered meaningless in light of the findings in this dataset and it is evident challenges with social interaction faced by autistic individuals cannot be categorically linked to an absence of imaginary activities.

Findings from this dataset call for Harris’s conceptualisations of sustained imagination to be further developed. The phenomenon of paracosms is begging for further research questions including about the different roles the creators take on within them, the connection the creators have with them and how, more generally, they relate to stages of child development amongst both neurotypical and neurodiverse children.
Chapter 6

6.1. Conclusion

Paracosms are rare phenomena according to the literature base, yet a high incidence was found amongst this sample of autistic children and young people. This thesis is a rich extension of the pilot study (Boyle, 2021) and demonstrates ICs and paracosms can support aspects of autistic CYP’s development, their sense of self, their wellbeing, anxiety regulation and social communication difficulties. It is possible to view these findings through the lens of Maslow’s (1954) Hierarchy of Needs and understand them as essential components for the autistic CYP being able to access self-actualisation.

However, despite the many perceived advantages and positive purposes served, accounts of ICs and paracosms also shine a light on the participant’s lived difficulties in their real lives, particularly the challenges many face in navigating social relationships and achieving a sense of belonging.

Autistic CYP are not a homogenous group and therefore there is variation in experience, however it is possible to recognise evidence of strengths related to creativity, imagination and resilience. Furthermore, the participants presented as socially motivated but demonstrated needs with regards to navigating social relationships in their real lives. Despite the resourcefulness recognised in these CYP actively meeting their own needs through their ICs and paracosms, risk
factors were also identified through the potential for unfulfillment and further isolation.

The findings from this thesis call into question the Theory of Mind hypothesis (Baron-Cohen, 1995), the Social Motivation theory (Dawson et al., 2005) and the more general imagination deficit narrative seen through the research base (ie. Ten Eycke & Muller, 2018; Craig and Baron-Cohen, 1999). These findings also challenge our understanding of sustained imagination theory in child development (Harris, 2000). This new data is incredibly rich but difficult to connect to old data, particularly with regards to paracosms, which speaks to paucity in the literature and degree to which it is an understudied area. I would assert that our understanding of the form and functions of imaginary phenomena in autistic childhood and their significance for development and wellbeing is not well developed.

Issues with previous research relating to autism and imagination have been identified, suggesting many invalid, unreliable and potentially harmful conclusions have been drawn in relation to deficits and impairments. This presents as a serious research issue and requires counterance through person-centred measures and community participation. A critical realist perspective informing the qualitative approach to respond to the research aims in this study allowed for rich exploration of autistic CYP’s experiences, as opposed to prior research which has sought observable instances of imagination in the autistic population using more empirical perspectives and approaches.
This thesis addresses the theoretical gap with regards to autistic CYP’s experiences with and perceptions of ICs and paracosms, however it also contributes towards the ethical and methodological evolution with regards to autism research. The findings support previous claims that ICs are a valuable aspect for development (Majors, 2013), and the same can be considered for childhood worldplay; autistic CYP’s experiences demonstrate how salutary the ICs and paracosms can be in terms of the positive purposes they serve and the many advantages perceived by the CYP who create them.

6.2. Strengths and limitations of the study

Strengths of this study include the child-centred and strengths-based approach adopted throughout and the lengths taken during the pre-interview activity phase of data collection to ensure the interviews were as accessible and comfortable as possible for the participants. Consultations with autistic researchers was a key strength to this study and informed much of these preparations. Furthermore, my skillset as a Trainee Educational Psychologist supported my being able to build rapport effectively with the CYP, which also supported their participation. I have demonstrated transparency as a researcher throughout and the use of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was a further strength in being able to limit the influence I had on the findings, particularly as I had carried out a pilot study on the topic (Boyle, 2021).
With regards to limitations, I acknowledge that as I am not autistic, there may be aspects to the interpretation of the data which are impacted by this lack of experiential insight. Including more levels of participation may have supported with this, such as member checking with participants or holding another expert-by-experience panel to discuss the findings, moving the research from Consultation to a level of Partnership or Control on the ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969). Furthermore despite the steps taken to increase my reflexivity throughout the process, my awareness of findings from the Pilot study and more generally, my role as the researcher is likely to still have had some influence on the findings, as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006) who argue researchers cannot simply ‘give voice’ through the use of Thematic Analysis as their own experiences and beliefs will affect the lens through which they interpret information.

In addition, it is important to recognise autistic children are not a homogenous group and this research does not consider the experiences of imaginary activities of non-verbal autistic individuals and those who experience complex additional needs as part of their autism diagnosis. This is a longstanding issue in autism research; Russell et al. (2019) reviewed 301 studies which include more that 100,000 autistic participants and found 94% of them did not have ‘intellectual disability’, despite it being understood that 50% of autistic individuals have additional ‘intellectual disability’. It is likely that these groups may not be able to access traditional interviews so considerable thought is needed with regards to designing future research on the topic which is inclusive of their views.
and experiences, possibly including the use of assistive communication technology.

6.3. Generalisability of findings

The small and heterogeneous sample in this research creates a challenge for making empirical generalisations. Furthermore, I am not able to make claims about any meaning between differences in experience related to age or gender due to the sample size and makeup.

There is low generalisability with regards to autistic experiences of ICs and paracosms and the purposes they serve the individual. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants and while I acknowledge many autistic children do struggle with imaginative play, I suggest there is enough evidence in this research to generalise that an autism diagnosis is not synonymous with an imaginative deficit, a theory of mind impairment and an absence of social motivation.

6.4. Implications for researchers

This thesis emphasises the importance of conducting autism research which is inclusive through adopting a person-centred approach and making reasonable adjustments in line with participants' needs.
I suggest future research includes participatory measures, the pre-interview activities and explores the phenomena of imaginary activities in childhood on a wider scale, with a larger sample. This will make it possible to group findings related to age, gender, and whether the ICs and paracosms are past or current, while maintaining a qualitative approach which remains primarily interested in individual experience.

6.5. Implications of findings for educational psychology, parents, education and childcare professionals

Through taking time to understand a child’s experience with ICs/paracosms and considering, supported by the research, what purposes they are serving for the individual, EPs can play a role in working systemically, guided by Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) bioecological model, to support educational settings, childcare professionals and parents to better meet the needs identified as currently relying on alternate means. For example, it is important to hold in mind the findings which posit that while autistic CYP are able to access a sense of safety in their imaginary relationships, their social needs in reality remain unmet due to the imaginary nature of these relationships. Adults working with autistic CYP have a role in supporting their relational development and can help them experience friendships in a way which remains safe and comfortable for them. Childcare and educational professionals can also support with anxiety regulation, supporting the development of self-esteem and providing opportunities for the CYP to feel autonomous and in control, such as including
them in decision making or offering roles of responsibility in the school community.

Educational Psychologists can offer support across these areas on a systemic level, while also providing more individual support which keeps the CYP’s voice central and works to support their individual needs so that their engagement with ICs and paracosms is more pull than push. Educational Psychologists can also use these findings in both training and consultation settings to support others to move away from deficit narratives related to autism, thereby also shifting the focus away from outcomes and provision for autistic CYP which is centred around reducing and removing autistic traits, such as through ABA therapy. Instead, Educational Psychologists can draw on these findings to encourage others to adopt the ‘Autistic Advantage’ (Grant & Kara, 2021) perspective and work to raise strengths and empower individuals, as well as meet the needs and support the difficulties the individual is presenting with. This approach is also in line with the social model of disability (Chown et al., 2017) through recognition that autistic experiences are not inherently wrong, but often exacerbated by neurotypical structures and systems.

Parents and professionals can also follow the participant’s advice around adult involvement with an autistic CYP’s ICs and paracosm: avoid discouragement, show curiosity and interest, use them as a way to connect with the CYP, explore their interests and share imaginary play together.
References


Dear Parent,

Research about autistic children’s imaginary friends

Title: Autistic children’s experiences and perceptions of imaginary companions and paracosms (imaginary worlds)

This letter is to let you know about research on autistic children’s imaginary friends which is being conducted as part of my Professional Doctoral training in Child and Adolescent Educational Psychology at the Institute of Education, University College London (UCL). I would be grateful if you could read the information below and return the consent form if you would like your child to participate.

Who is carrying out the research?
My name is Katharine (Kate) Boyle and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). It is just me carrying out the research but I am being supervised by Dr Karen Majors who is an Educational Psychologist and an Academic Tutor and Dr Melernie Meheux who is a Senior Educational Psychologist and a Professional Tutor.

Why is the research being done?
A lot of research has been done about Autism and imagination but it is often with the aim of finding and understanding differences in the brain. As a Trainee EP I adopt a strengths-based approach; I am interested in focusing on the experience, resilience, needs and abilities of autistic individuals and how we can develop our understandings of these through exploring relationships with imaginary friends and imaginary worlds.

Why is my child being invited to take part?
Most studies about imaginary friends have shown them to be a positive feature in the lives of the children who have them and that they are often more common than we might think. There has not been much research carried out about autistic children’s experiences. It is important to share first-hand experiences through this research to effectively challenge dated and harmful beliefs about imaginative abilities in autistic individuals, as well as learn about the purposes that imaginary friends and worlds serve. I very much hope that you would like your child to take part and share their experiences.

What should I consider beforehand?
To have a consistent sample, it is a criteria that your child has a diagnosis of Autism and is of primary school age but it doesn’t matter if they have a current or past imaginary friend or world. It also doesn’t matter if it’s imaginary and made up or a special toy or teddy (or anything else) which is given its own characteristics by the child. Imaginary worlds (paracosms) are special and unique creations, often with multiple characters and functions. I have consulted a panel of autistic individuals throughout the design of this research to ensure best practice with regards to making the interviews accessible, as well as ensuring the purpose of my research is in the best interests of the autistic community.

What will happen if I agree for my child to take part?
If you consent for your child to participate, I will contact you to make arrangements for an interview with your child. We will make adjustments to make sure they are comfortable experiences and your child will have the right to not answer any questions they don’t want to, and to withdraw from the research at any point up to when the data is anonymised. The questions will be about their friendships, interests, likes and dislikes as
well as about the characteristics of the imaginary friend(s)/world and their relationships with them. I will also ask your child if they would like to draw characters or aspects of their imaginary world. The interviews will last between 30-45 minutes and we can agree a time and place that works for you and your child. You are welcome to be present during the interview if that will support them in the space.

Will anyone know my child has been involved?
All information provided will be treated confidentially. Your name, your child’s name and the names of the imaginary friends will not be used in any report of findings and quotes will remain anonymous. Confidentiality would only be broken in exceptional circumstances, for example, if it was felt that someone was at risk.

Does my child have to take part?
It is entirely up to you and your child whether or not you choose for your child to take part. I hope that if you do choose for them to be involved then you will find it a valuable experience but you will both have the right to withdraw from the process at any point, up to the point of the data being anonymised, without giving a reason.

Will I be able to see the results of the research?
After the research is completed in July 2023 I will share a summary of my findings directly with you if you would like to read them. The research is also likely to be published upon completion, due to it being the first of its nature, so should be available to access and share on a wider scale.

Data Protection Privacy Notice
The data controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk. Further information on how UCL uses participant information from research studies can be found in the ‘general’ privacy notice for participants in research studies here.

Contact for further information
I am very willing to answer any questions you may have about the research, I can be contacted via email: katherine.boyle.20@ucl.ac.uk

If you would like your child to participate, please fill out the document which was attached alongside this letter called ‘Informed Consent Form’ and return it to me using the email address above.

I am really looking forward to learning about the experiences of your child.
Thank you very much,

Kate Boyle
Trainee Educational Psychologist
Participant Consent Form

Research Title: Autistic children’s experiences and perceptions of imaginary companions and paracosms (imaginary worlds)

Researcher: Katharine Boyle, Trainee Educational Psychologist

Research Supervisors: Dr Karen Majors, Educational Psychologist and Academic & Professional Tutor
Dr Melernie Meheux, Senior Educational Psychologist & Professional Tutor

If you are happy for your child to participate in this study please complete this consent form by ticking each item, as appropriate, and return to the researcher:

1) I confirm that I have read and understood this information sheet, and have had the opportunity to consider the information with my child, ask questions, and have had these questions adequately answered. [ ]

2) I and my child understand that my child’s participation is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw up to the point of the data being anonymised, without giving any reason. [ ]

3) I and my child know that they can refuse to answer any or all of the questions and that they can withdraw from completing the interview at any point. [ ]

4) I agree for the interview to be recorded, and that recordings will be stored in line with UCL policy. I know that all data will be kept under the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). [ ]

5) I agree that small direct quotes may be used in reports (anonymised). [ ]

6) I know that I can use the contact details of the researcher to follow-up on any issues which may arise from my child being a participant in the research. [ ]

7) I understand that in exceptional circumstances anonymity and confidentiality would have to be broken, for example, if it was felt that someone was at risk. In these circumstances the concern would be shared with the Research Supervisors. [ ]

Name: ……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Signature: ………………………………………………………….. Date: ………………………………………

Name of researcher: ……………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Signature: ………………………………………………………….. Date: ………………………………………
Appendix B – Panel Member Information and Consent Form

Institute of Education

Expert-by-Experience Panel for research about autistic children’s imaginary friends and imaginary worlds

Title: Autistic children’s experiences and perceptions of imaginary companions and paracosms (imaginary worlds)

This letter is to let you know about research on autistic children’s imaginary friends which is being conducted as part of my Professional Doctoral training in Child and Adolescent Educational Psychology at the Institute of Education, University College London (UCL). I would be grateful if you could read the information below and return the consent form if you would like to participate in an ‘Expert-by-Experience’ Panel session.

Who is carrying out the research?
My name is Katharine Boyle and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). It is just me carrying out the research but I am being supervised by Dr Karen Majors who is an Educational Psychologist and an Academic Tutor, and Dr Melernie Meheux who is a Senior Educational Psychologist and a Professional Tutor.

Why is the research being done?
A lot of research has been done about Autism and imagination but it is often with the aim of finding and understanding differences in cognition. As a TEP I adopt a strengths-based approach; I am interested in focusing on the experience, resilience, needs and abilities of autistic individuals and how we can develop our understandings of these through exploring relationships with imaginary friends and paracosms. I am looking for learning opportunities rather than focusing on differences.

Why am I being invited to join an Expert-by-Experience Panel?
Research into Autism has historically been deficit-oriented and exclusive of community participation. With awareness that I am not autistic, I feel it is important to include views and voices of those who are through the design of my research as to ensure it serves the best interests of the community. A group of autistic children will be supporting the study as Research Assistants, and I am keen to set up an advisory panel of experts who are autistic and have experience with conducting research. I hope to receive guidance around my proposed methodology (interviews), the terminology I use throughout my report and accessible ways of sharing my findings. I would also welcome discussion around other areas I may not have thought about but might be important.

What will happen if I choose to take part?
If you consent to participate in an Expert-by-Experience Panel, I will suggest some times for us to meet virtually via Microsoft Teams and send you my list of questions beforehand. If you would prefer to meet 1-1 than in a group that is fine, please let me know. We will meet for up to 1 hour and I will audio record the session. This recording will then be deleted after I have written down the information and advice given. No personal details will be collected or shared but I shall express gratitude to the Panel members in the thesis and can include names if you would like me to.
Do I have to take part?
It is entirely up to you whether or not you choose to take part. Unfortunately I am not in a position to offer compensation but I hope that if you do choose to be involved then you will find it a valuable experience in supporting the direction of current Autism Research at doctoral level. You have the right to withdraw from the process at any point without giving a reason.

Will I be able to see the results of the research?
When the research is completed in July 2023 I will share a summary of my findings directly with you if you would like to read them.

Data Protection Privacy Notice
The data controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk. Further information on how UCL uses participant information from research studies can be found in the ‘general’ privacy notice for participants in research studies here.

Contact for further information
I am very willing to answer any questions you may have about the research, I can be contacted via email: katharine.boyle.20@ucl.ac.uk

I would be very grateful for your consult if you are interested in supporting this research. If you would like to participate as a Panel member, please fill out the document below and return it to me using the email address above.

I am really looking forward to meeting you and hearing your views.

Thank you very much,

Kate Boyle
Trainee Educational Psychologist
Informed Consent – Expert-by-Experience Panel Member

If you are happy to participate as a Panel member please complete this consent form by ticking each item, as appropriate, and return to the researcher:

1) I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided, and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and had these questions adequately answered. 

2) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from being a Panel member at any time without giving any reason.

3) I know that I can refuse to answer any or all of the questions and that I can withdraw from the online meeting at any point.

4) I agree for the session to be audio recorded, and that recordings will be stored in line with UCL policy. I know that all data will be kept under the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

5) I know that no personal information about me will be included in the Research unless I ask for my name to be included in the Acknowledgements.

6) I know that I can use the contact details of the researcher to follow-up on any issues which may arise from being a Panel member.

7) I understand that in exceptional circumstances anonymity and confidentiality would have to be broken, for example, if it was felt that someone was at risk. In these circumstances the concern would be shared with the Research Supervisor.

Name:.................................................................................................................................

Signature: ...................................................................................................................... Date:............................................................................

Name of researcher:.............................................................................................................

Signature: ...................................................................................................................... Date:............................................................................
Appendix C – Research Passport
THINGS I LIKE TO DO...
THINGS I DON'T LIKE TO DO...
How do you find communicating with new people?

What makes it easier for you to communicate?

What helps if you are struggling to communicate?
**WORKING TOGETHER**

**When I need a break you will know because...** *(pick the ones you can do and add your own ideas!)*

- I will say ‘I need a break’
- I will sign stop
- I can’t sit still
- I will get up and come back when I am ready
- It depends on the day

**BREAK TIME!**

**When I need a break I would like to...** *(pick the ones you like and add your own ideas!)*

- Chat
- Do something on my own
- Listen to music
- Do some drawing
- Go for a walk
- It depends how I feel
Sometimes doing new things with new people can be hard. What things do you do to help if you feel worried or worn out?
This research is with autistic children and young people. Please let me know here if you have any other additional needs and what those are...
Appendix D – Coded data extract

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Cluster Themes</th>
<th>Overarching Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yeah, can you remember around that period of your life what else was going on? Was there anything you were finding tricky or...</td>
<td>Social interaction difficulties</td>
<td>Friendship difficulties in real life</td>
<td>Meeting social needs</td>
<td>Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: I’m not sure, I don’t think I ever really made good friends with anybody in school. I um, so that might be partly why. But I did have like, kind of weird friendships with people like um, I would try and be friends or want to be friends with someone and they’d seem to want to be friends with me but then around their own friends they just wouldn’t like...they would be mean to me or they would exclude me from groups. Or we’d just end up playing like,</td>
<td>Friendship challenges</td>
<td>Socially motivated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Desire for friendship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiences of exclusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
stupid games of tag where I was always ‘it’ or...stuff like that, that I just didn’t enjoy. Or sometimes I think I was lonely because I also remember I’d sit on the Astroturf in the playground in primary school there was like this one birch tree or something and I would like sit down at the bottom of it and there were ants and I would just play with these ants and talk to them and stuff. So I guess that was like sort of imaginary friends as well but um, yeah I would prefer to just talk to other things than humans because...they weren’t very interesting to me, humans. Yeah, you’ve explained that really well. Right let’s move that one and look at the next...so how often did you spend time with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loneliness</th>
<th>inclusive</th>
<th>Sense of belonging</th>
<th>Connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeking connection</td>
<td>Alleviating loneliness</td>
<td>Meeting social needs</td>
<td>Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal ICs</td>
<td>Socially motivated</td>
<td>Play</td>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for animals</td>
<td>Special interests?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged with ICs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
your imaginary friends?
1: Um, I don’t really know. It was like...they appeared everyday and they would just kind of be there if I ever wanted to like play with them or...it was kind of like if I was interested in art or something then I wouldn’t constantly be drawing stuff but I draw stuff when I felt bored or when I was like not engaging in some other activity. So it kind of...the same would apply to imaginary friends, if I was bored or lonely or had nothing else to do at breaktime if I was just waiting for the bell to go then I would just pretend that I had imaginary friends. Or like if I was on my own at home then I would just pretend because I had the freedom to do that then and explore different ideas
Yeah, so when you had free time or when you were bored while doing something else were the main times
1: Yeah, not with other people. I wouldn’t usually like um, I don’t know actually maybe I would. I don’t know. Oh and then I forgot to say as well, after the fairies there were dragons
Oh there were dragons as well
1: Yes lots of dragons! Um, that’s probably also the most like...there was Bip and then there were dragons and those were the main ones
Oh so the dragons were more significant than the fairies then?
1: Probably, because I was probably more imaginative like about the worlds I created them and the different...so I don’t know when this was...for the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fantasy ICs</th>
<th>Animal ICs</th>
<th>Special interests</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Wellbeing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Imaginary worlds</td>
<td>Fantasy ICs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special interests</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Play</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
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</table>
In the second half of primary school, I think it may have started in Year 3 or 4. I started becoming interested in dragons because one of my friends who was interested in horses and unicorns and stuff played a make-believe game with me about dragons instead of unicorns. I was like ‘no but I like unicorns!’ but I went along with it anyway and I kind of liked the idea of being a dragon or having dragon imaginary friends and just the idea of dragons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary age</th>
<th>Special interests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ICs related to interests</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretend play</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared play</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IC created intentionally</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YP takes on different role to self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>