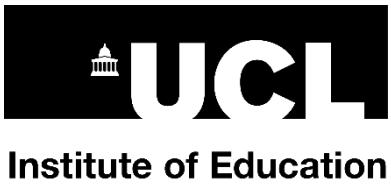
Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology



Exploring the Role of Belonging in the Inclusion of Students Attending Specially Resourced Provisions for Autism and/or Speech, Language, and Communication Needs in Mainstream Secondary Schools

Lisa Sheridan

Institute of Education, University College London

Doctorate in Professional Educational Child and Adolescent Psychology (DEdPsy)

Declaration

I, Lisa Sheridan, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

This study explores the belonging experiences of students in Specially Resourced Provisions (SRPs) for autism and/or Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) in mainstream secondary schools. Situated within ongoing tensions regarding inclusion, the study uses belonging as a lens to explore whether SRPs offer a bridge to successful inclusion or reinforce separation.

Guided by the Integrative Framework for Belonging (Allen et al., 2021) and the Bio-Psycho-Social-Ecological Model of School Belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017), this qualitative research employed a case study design in two mainstream secondary schools with an autism and/or SLCN SRP. Drawing on participatory research method approaches, a Research Group of three sixth form students with experience attending SRPs served as experts by experience, offering insights into the research tools and focus. The study involved semi-structured interviews with eight students and eight staff members (four staff from SRPs and four from mainstream), alongside observations within the SRP and mainstream school. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was used to develop themes across cases and data.

Findings indicate that belonging is experienced as a dynamic, shifting process shaped by relationships, identity, and the ability to participate meaningfully and authentically across both contexts. While the SRP provided a safe space that supported authenticity and connection, they also reinforced perceptions of difference, leading to masking and a dual sense of identity. This study makes original contributions to the inclusion and belonging literature,

recognising that students in SRPs experience fragmented belonging, described as ‘Split-Context Belonging’, shaped by constant shifts in identity negotiation and misalignment between the SRP and mainstream, revealing that SRP placement alone does not guarantee inclusion. The findings offer implications for schools in creating neurodiversity-affirming spaces and ensuring coherence between the SRP and mainstream school.

Impact Statement

This study contributes new theoretical and practical insights into inclusive education by exploring the experiences of autistic students and those with SLCN attending SRPs in mainstream secondary schools. Using the lens of belonging, framed through Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework for Belonging and Allen and Kern's (2017) Bio-Psycho-Social-Ecological Model (BPSEM) for School Belonging, the study reveals how students experience belonging as divided across coexisting settings, leading to the conceptual lens of 'Split-Context Belonging'.

Academically, the study deepens understanding of how SRPs operate as a middle ground approach between mainstream and specialist provision, and how belonging can serve as a meaningful indicator of inclusion. While SRPs can provide individualised support, they may also unintentionally separate students from their peers. The emotional impact of switching between 'SRP student' and 'mainstream student' roles highlights the importance of whole-school inclusion and embracing neurodiversity. These insights add to the theoretical literature on inclusion, including the role of SRPs through the lens of the Dilemma of Difference (Minow, 1990). This study extends existing belonging theory by introducing Split-Context Belonging, capturing how students in SRPs experience belonging as divided across the mainstream and SRP settings, impacted by constant shifts in identity negotiation and misalignment between the settings.

For Educational Psychologists (EPs), the study offers meaningful contributions to both casework and systemic practice. It provides insight into

the factors that support or hinder belonging within SRPs and mainstream settings, emphasising the emotional cost of identity-switching, the potential for stigma, and the importance of relational safety. EPs can apply this knowledge to support schools in creating safe, identity-affirming environments through consultation, training, and whole-school development work, thus enhancing school inclusivity. At a Local Authority (LA) level, where EPs contribute to placement recommendations and strategic planning, understanding how SRPs impact belonging can improve the quality and relevance of professional advice. The findings also guide how EPs might advise on the design and development of SRPs, offering evidence-based insights. More broadly, the study supports EPs in advocating for belonging as a key psychological construct linked to students' engagement, achievement, and wellbeing. For schools, this study underscores the importance of coherence between SRP and mainstream practices, as well as the necessity of emotionally safe and neurodiversity-affirming spaces and ethos.

At a policy level, the study advocates for a shift in how success in inclusion is evaluated. Instead of concentrating on access to mainstream classrooms, inclusion should encompass the emotional dimensions of inclusion, i.e., belonging. The provision of SRPs alone does not ensure inclusion; it depends on how well these are supported in the broader school system. The study calls for policies that support flexible inclusion models, professional development on neurodiversity for all school staff, and systemic strategies to enhance cohesion between SRP and mainstream environments.

Findings will be shared through a research briefing distributed to participants, schools, and EPs in the LA, as well as to Trainee EPs and EPs via

a university research presentation. Furthermore, findings will be communicated during training sessions for schools with SRPs within the LA.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Term
APA	American Psychiatric Association
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BPS	British Psychological Society
BPSEM	Bio-Psycho-Socio-Ecological Model
DfE	Department for Education
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
ELSA	Emotional Literacy Support Assistant
EP	Educational Psychologist
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
PSSMS	Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale
rTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
RQ	Research Question
SALT	Speech and Language Therapy
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEND	Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities
SLCN	Speech, Language and Communication Needs
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
SRP	Specially Resourced Provisions
TA	Teaching Assistant
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

This thesis explores the inclusion of students attending Specially Resourced Provisions (SRPs) for Autism and/or Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) within mainstream secondary schools. This chapter outlines the study's context by defining key terminology, exploring current inclusion practices, and introducing the role of belonging in inclusion. The chapter concludes by highlighting the role of SRPs before presenting the research rationale.

1.2 The Aims of Inclusion

Inclusion is underpinned by a commitment to fostering equitable learning and participation opportunities for all students (Van Steen & Wilson, 2020). In the United Kingdom (UK), the Warnock Committee Report (1978) initiated a shift towards ‘integrating’ children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) into mainstream schools (Frederickson & Cline, 2015). Internationally, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) advocated for innovative educational policies that transitioned from merely integrating students with SEN into mainstream schools to the concept of inclusive schools, aiming to eliminate barriers and promote access to child-centred pedagogies for all learners. In 2024, the 30th anniversary of the Salamanca Statement reignited calls to bridge the gap between inclusive ideals and practice, emphasising the need for schools where all students feel valued and experience belonging (UNESCO, 2024). However, Ainscow (2020) contends that the lack of a collectively

agreed-upon definition of inclusion challenges progress towards inclusive education.

1.3 Tensions in Inclusion

The inclusion of students with SEN remains a widely disputed concept (Norwich, 2013; Webster, 2022). A lack of shared understanding, shaped by differing models, policies, and practices, complicates its global implementation (Lauchlan & Greig, 2015). Underlying these challenges are tensions between the medical model of disability, which views disability as an individual deficit to be treated, and the social model, which locates the problem within societal barriers and advocates for systemic change to enable full participation (Reindal, 2008). In practice, schools often blend both models, providing individual support within systems that do not fully accommodate diversity. In efforts to 'include' students with SEN, a reliance on withdrawal from lessons, a narrowed curriculum, and support primarily from Teaching Assistants (TAs) can inadvertently reinforce exclusion (Cigman, 2007; Webster, 2022). Webster (2022) posits that this allows for 'structural exclusion' of students with SEN, leading to continued debates on the most appropriate educational placement (Norwich, 2008a).

1.4 Inclusion in Policy and Practice in England

The SEND Code of Practice, introduced under the Children and Families Act (2014), underpins inclusive education policy in England (Department for Education (DfE), 2015b, p. 25). It defines SEN as a learning difficulty or

disability that requires additional provisions to enable a child or young person's access to education (DfE, 2015b). This legislation also introduced Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), which outline the additional needs of children and young people and the provisions required to help them make progress in education (Frederickson & Cline, 2015).

However, inclusion faces challenges from competing governmental policies (Lehane, 2017). Standardised, rigid curricula and performance cultures clash with the flexibility and adjustments needed within inclusive practices (Hodkinson & Burch, 2019; Luff, 2021). The growing demand for EHCPs (Marsh, 2023) and concerns regarding the sustainability of special school placements have led to calls for expanding inclusive provision within mainstream schools (Sibieta & Snape, 2024).

1.5 Autism and Speech, Language, and Communication Needs

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by differences in social communication and interaction skills, sensory processing, and repetitive or restricted behaviours and interests that impact daily functioning (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013). Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) refer to difficulties in speech, understanding, or use of language and social communication (Dockrell et al., 2012). SLCN and autism are closely linked, as autistic individuals experience core challenges with social communication and interaction, impacting their understanding and use of language (Paul & Wilson, 2009). In England, more than 70% of autistic students are educated in mainstream schools (DfE, 2024a).

The mainstream school environment presents many social, sensory, and structural complexities for autistic students (Cook et al., 2018; Horgan et al., 2023). Additionally, Crane and Pellicano (2022) criticise that inclusion is often ‘assimilation’, teaching autistic students to conform to neurotypical norms. While contemporary understandings embrace a neurodiversity perspective, framing autism as a natural variation in communication, cognitive, and sensory processing (Leadbitter et al., 2021), mainstream schools have been slow to align with this shift (Hodkinson & Williams-Brown, 2022). Consequently, a survey conducted with 176 autistic young people in England found that over half felt unhappy at school (All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism, 2019), raising questions about inclusion in mainstream schools.

These issues reflect a ‘theory-practice gap’, where conflicting policies, theoretical debates, and practical constraints hinder inclusion ideals (Greany et al., 2024). Consequently, attention is increasingly shifting to the quality of students’ experiences, including the extent to which students are engaged, valued, and supported in school (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018).

1.6 The Role of Belonging

Belonging refers to an individual’s sense of acceptance and connection to social groups, communities, and environments (Allen et al., 2021). It is considered a fundamental human need essential for wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Belonging is linked to positive outcomes in both mental and physical health (Allen & Kern, 2017; Hale et al., 2005). For adolescents, a key period of identity formation and peer affiliation (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011),

belonging is also associated with enhanced academic outcomes, attendance, motivation, and engagement in school (O'Brien & Bowles, 2013; Pate et al., 2017). Despite its significance, belonging receives comparatively less attention in education than academic performance (Allen & Kern, 2017). In the Programme for International Student Assessment's (PISA) most recent report, only 64% of 15 to 16-year-old UK students felt they belonged at school, compared to the global average of 75% (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD, 2023).

Given belonging's strong links with positive social, educational, and behavioural outcomes, researchers argue that focusing on belonging could provide a practical lens for evaluating and achieving inclusion (Prince & Hadwin, 2013; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). The DfE has acknowledged the importance of belonging, highlighting that a diminished sense of belonging can lead to disengagement, poor motivation, and lower achievement (Frederickson et al., 2009; Graham et al., 2019).

1.7 Specially Resourced Provisions

Inclusive education in England is underpinned by the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015b), which emphasises that Local Authorities (LAs) should ensure students with SEN are educated alongside peers in mainstream settings wherever possible, and that schools are expected to remove barriers to participation and learning. This has resulted in a continuum of provision to meet a wide range of SEN (Bond & Hebron, 2016). Within this continuum, Specially Resourced Provisions (SRPs) present an alternative model within the inclusion

debate, positioned between specialist and mainstream provisions (Jordan, 2008). In England, SRPs were developed in response to the rise in students with SEN and the ongoing policy efforts to enhance inclusion in mainstream schools (Halsall et al., 2021). The use of SRPs within discourse around inclusion attracts international interest due to continued debates globally. In Finland (Saloviita, 2020) and Ireland (Shevlin & Banks, 2021), the equivalent provisions are referred to as ‘special classes’ where there is little (roughly 5 hours per week) to no access to teaching alongside their mainstream peers. In Austria, ‘cooperative classes’ are led by a specialist teacher, and some lessons are shared with mainstream peers. Movement towards such alternative models of inclusion requires further research on how these provisions are implemented and experienced.

In England, the Department for Education (DfE, 2015a) outlines that SRPs are spaces located within mainstream schools that provide additional specialist support for students with a specific SEN, usually those with EHCPs. Although various terms, such as SRPs, Resource Bases, and SEN Units, are used interchangeably, they signify distinct models of support (Doherty, 2025). SRPs or Resource Bases enhance mainstream school provision by enabling students with SEN to access learning alongside their peers while receiving specialist support beyond what is typically available (El-Salahi et al., 2023). According to the DfE (2015a), students in SRPs are expected to spend over 50% of their timetable in mainstream lessons; however, this can vary across different LAs and school settings and is often tailored to individual student needs. SEN Units operate with a different model, where students primarily receive their education within the unit itself, with no expectation of regular

participation in mainstream lessons (DfE, 2015a). This thesis focuses on SRPs that align more closely with inclusion as set out by the SEND Code of Practice, as students in SRPs frequently access the mainstream environment (DfE, 2015b).

In terms of policy and guidance around SRPs, as outlined in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015b), mainstream schools receive resources to support students with SEN that are decided by the LA they are within. Therefore, the LA is generally responsible for determining how children and young people with SEN should be supported, including developing SRPs, placing students in SRPs, and deciding criteria for those placements. Placement in an SRP is typically determined by an LA placement panel, based on the student's individual needs, parental preference, and the availability of appropriate provision (IPSEA, 2024). The DfE has outlined some non-statutory guidelines around SRPs; however, they acknowledge that the structure and function of SRPs vary greatly due to local approaches to inclusion (DfE, 2015a). For example, the DfE (2015a) outlines that SRPs should offer placements to fewer than 30 students with an EHCP; however, the responsibility for determining the number of funded places lies with the LA that maintains the school (DfE, 2025). Most SRPs are generally needs-led and support specific SEND, such as autism, SLCN, social, emotional, and mental health needs (SEMH), or physical disabilities (White, 2010). Generally, SRPs have a higher staff-to-student ratio, which is reflected in the additional funding each placement in an SRP provides (DfE, 2025), which includes specialist teachers and TAs, although staffing ratios and roles differ across SRPs. Further guidelines for SRPs include small rooms for one-to-one and group teaching, a

low-arousal or sensory room, and a space where students can access to have lunch and spend their break if they find the mainstream environment overwhelming (DfE 2015a).

As part of the government's wider SEND reform agenda towards a more inclusive education system, there is a growing emphasis on expanding SRPs within mainstream schools to accommodate students with complex needs (DfE, 2025). As of January 2024, England hosts 392 schools equipped with SEN units and 1,168 schools with an SRP, reflecting a growing increase from previous years (DfE, 2024a). SRPs and SEN units are growing in popularity for the placement of students with EHCPs, with this figure increasing by 25% over the last 6 years (Turner, 2024). While there continues to be a rise in SRPs to meet the needs of students with SEN in mainstream schools, limited research has focused on their operation and impact (Strogilos & Ward, 2024).

1.8 Rationale for Study

Achieving successful inclusion has been an enduring challenge in education due to differing theoretical positions, contrasting educational policies, and a lack of resources for schools (Lamb, 2022; Warnes et al., 2022). Despite continued commitments to inclusion, implementation remains inadequate, leading to exclusionary practices, poor outcomes for students with SEN, and reliance on specialist provision (Norwich, 2023). Within these debates, SRPs have garnered attention as offering a 'middle ground' between mainstream and specialist settings, providing tailored support while facilitating access to mainstream learning environments (Hebron & Bond, 2017). Despite the

increased focus on SRPs, research is still limited, particularly concerning students' lived experiences, with existing studies largely centring on teachers' and parents' perspectives (Landor & Perepa, 2017), mainly within primary settings (Strogilos & Ward, 2024).

This study addresses this by centring on the voices of students attending SRPs for autism and/or SLCN in mainstream secondary schools. Through a belonging lens (Goodall, 2020), it explores how students feel valued, accepted, and connected within their school environments. This is particularly important given ongoing tensions surrounding inclusion, where placement in mainstream schools alone does not guarantee inclusion or acceptance (Webster, 2022). By examining student perspectives within SRPs, this study contributes to debates on inclusion, which can inform academic discourse and policy development by offering insights into how SRPs operate as an alternative, inclusive educational model to support social and academic outcomes for students with SEN.

1.9 Relevance for Educational Psychologists

Educational Psychologists (EPs) play a key role in promoting inclusive practice across educational settings. While most EP work takes place at the individual or school level, EPs are also well-positioned to drive systemic change by supporting schools and LAs in reflecting on, evaluating, and developing inclusive policy and practice (Alderson, 2018). EPs utilise consultation, training, research, and strategic development work to assist schools in creating inclusive systems (Scottish Executive, 2002).

The study, which highlights student experiences of belonging in SRPs, is directly relevant to EPs' commitment to advocating for student voice and ensuring that young people are actively involved in shaping their educational experiences (Fox, 2015). By empowering student voice, EPs can support schools in developing inclusive practices that address students' concerns.

As SRPs gain popularity as a placement option (Strogilos & Ward, 2024), guidance on their implementation remains limited. Insights into the factors that support or hinder students' sense of belonging in SRPs can provide practical recommendations for inclusive practices. EPs can support schools in fostering a culture of belonging to promote inclusion. More broadly, EPs can aid schools in recognising the significance of belonging in student wellbeing, engagement, and academic success. At the LA level, since SRPs are accessed through placement panels, understanding how SRPs affect students' belonging will enable EPs to make informed recommendations regarding placement decisions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews literature relevant to the inclusion and belonging of students attending SRPs for autism and/or SLCN needs in mainstream secondary schools. It begins by critically examining the relationship between inclusion and belonging, followed by an exploration of key inclusion theories and the tensions surrounding its implementation. Belonging is then introduced as a lens for understanding the experiences of students with SEN attending mainstream schools, drawing on two theoretical models of belonging by Allen et al. (2021) and Allen and Kern (2017), which inform the overarching framework for this thesis. Given this study's focus on SRPs for autism and/or SLCN, particular attention is paid to the inclusion and belonging of autistic students. This reflects both the common practice of SRPs supporting students with autism and/or SLCN due to overlaps in needs (DfEa, 2015a; Dockrell et al., 2012) and the practical realities of accessing formal diagnoses (Crane et al., 2016). Literature also suggests that diagnostic labels may have limited impact on day-to-day educational practices, as teachers respond to need rather than diagnosis (Norwich, 2013). Therefore, focusing the literature review on autism offers a relevant lens for exploring students' experiences attending SRPs for autism and/or SLCN. The review concludes by examining existing research on SRPs within mainstream schools and evaluating their role in promoting inclusion and belonging. The literature review examines existing theories and research, identifying gaps and opportunities for further advancing knowledge. This study's search strategy is detailed in Appendix A.

2.2 Inclusion and Belonging

Inclusion is often framed as structural and pedagogical adaptations that enable all students to access and participate in education (Florian, 2008). However, the concept of inclusion remains elusive (Hodkinson, 2011). Researchers have highlighted its definitional vagueness and the difficulty in evaluating inclusive practices (Florian, 2008; Kovač & Vaala, 2019). Such ambiguity means that current mainstream school practices often fall short of inclusion goals, underscoring the need to explore how schools implement inclusion (Warnes et al., 2022). A study of six ‘inclusive’ secondary schools in England found that these schools embraced a whole-school ethos centred on equity, positive relationships, and cultivating a sense of belonging (Greany et al., 2024).

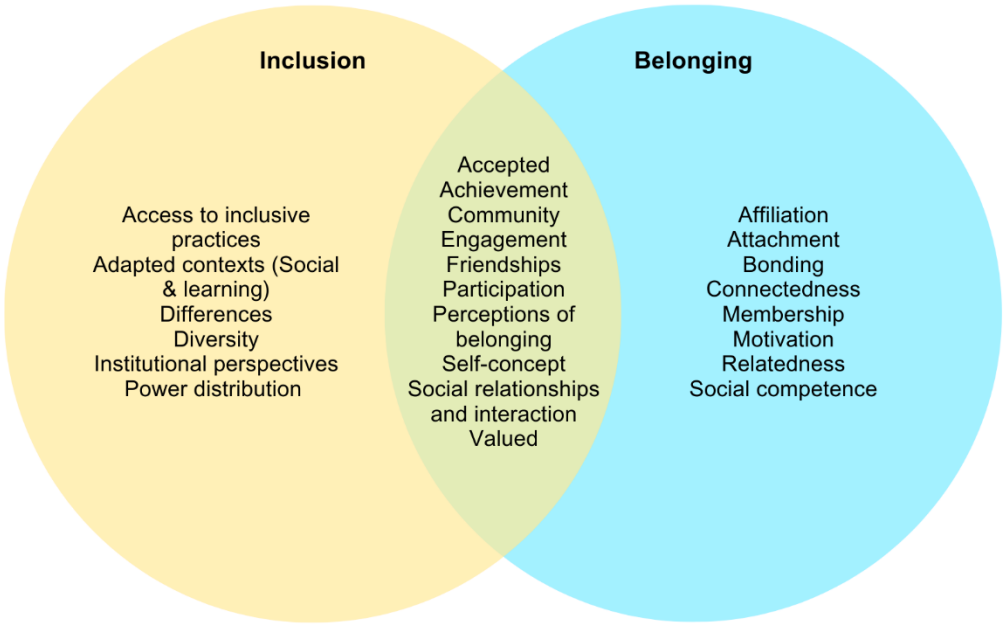
Given these definitional and evaluative challenges, some researchers have shifted their focus towards belonging. Belonging refers to the subjective experience of feeling valued and accepted within a community (Allen & Kern, 2017). It can be understood as a trait, reflecting a fundamental psychological need for connection, and as a state, referring to the situational or context-dependent experience of belonging (Allen et al., 2021). Although belonging is similarly multidimensional and variably defined, which will be explored in Section 2.4 of this literature review, it provides a means to operationalise the psychological experience of inclusion (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018; Prince & Hadwin, 2013).

The concepts of inclusion and belonging are closely related but not interchangeable. Some argue that belonging is a prerequisite for achieving true inclusion, as students who feel connected and valued are more likely to engage fully in school life (Goodall, 2020; Guerin & McMenamin, 2019). Others suggest

that belonging is a consequence of inclusion (Frederickson et al., 2007). Consequently, the research literature often uses the terms interchangeably, along with overlapping and similar terms to describe or indicate both concepts (Allen & Kern, 2017; Florian, 2005; Kovač & Vaala, 2021). The figure below illustrates the various terms associated with inclusion and belonging within the literature, highlighting areas of overlap.

Figure 1

Conceptual Overlap Between Inclusion and Belonging in the Literature, from Allen & Kern, 2017; Florian, 2005; Koster et al. 2009; Kovač & Vaala, 2021; Libbey, 2004; Prince & Hadwin, 2013



While inclusion remains an aspirational policy goal, belonging may provide a practical and measurable indicator of its realisation. As inclusion aims

to enhance educational outcomes, wellbeing, and social acceptance, belonging can offer insight into whether these goals have been achieved, given its links to improved academic and emotional outcomes (Allen et al., 2018; Frederickson et al., 2007). This emphasis on belonging aligns with contemporary movements that highlight the voices and experiences of children and young people (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Earnshaw, 2014). Despite this, the experiential dimension of inclusion is often overlooked, with research indicating that students may be physically present in the classroom yet lack a sense of belonging (Goodall, 2018; Humphrey & Symes, 2010).

This has led to calls for reframing inclusive education through a belonging-focused perspective, creating positive dialogue that can inform inclusive practices as opposed to merely reporting on the challenges within the SEND system (Long & Guo, 2023; Osborne & Reed, 2011; Slee, 2019). Therefore, this study positions belonging not as a substitute for inclusion but as a critical lens through which inclusion can be interpreted, understood, and achieved more meaningfully. It is therefore important to comprehend the tensions inherent in inclusion before exploring how inclusion could be realised through belonging.

2.3 Theoretical Underpinnings of Inclusion

In education, inclusion most commonly concerns the placement of students with SEN in mainstream schools, reflecting a long-standing debate over whether inclusion should be understood as integration or meaningful participation (Florian, 2014; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). The medical model of

disability, which historically positioned SEN as an individual deficit requiring remediation, has been widely critiqued and gradually supplanted by the social model, which reframes disability as a product of societal and environmental barriers (Reindal, 2008; Oliver, 2013). Despite this shift, tensions persist between these perspectives in both policy and practice, influencing how inclusion is implemented in schools. Critiques within education of the medical model concern the notion that providing ‘additional’ support for children and young people with SEN so that they can ‘fit into’ mainstream classrooms reflects the perspective of changing the student rather than adapting overall classroom pedagogies (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016). Current classroom practices intended to implement inclusion within mainstream schools bear resemblance to this approach of normalisation (Reindal, 2008). In contrast, the social model positions disability as an outcome of social barriers rather than individual deficits (Oliver, 1996) and recognises that adaptations to societal structures are needed to actively value, respect, and embrace everyone as equals in society (Oliver & Barnes, 2013). Critiques of this approach argue that the social model fails to acknowledge the real lived experiences of people with disabilities and presents individuals with disabilities as a homogeneous group (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2012; Gallagher et al., 2014).

Recognising limitations in both models, Engel’s (1977) biopsychosocial model acknowledges that biological factors, underpinning the medical model, are influenced by both psychological and social factors. Similarly, Reindal’s (2008) social relational model of disability advances this by understanding disability as a social construct and emphasising the social relationships and power dynamics that contribute to the experience of disability. Although such

models address tensions between the social and medical models, this represents an incomplete picture of the dilemmas within inclusion and SEND (Norwich, 2010).

2.3.1 Addressing Tensions in Inclusion

The Dilemma of Difference (Minow, 1990), arising from legal studies, encapsulates a central paradox in inclusion: when does recognising difference result in stigma, and when does ignoring difference lead to exclusion? Norwich's (2023) application of the Dilemma of Difference within inclusive education examines the inherent tensions between identifying individuals with SEN and the risk of stigma and othering, as well as the risk of losing protection and provision when failing to identify (Minow, 1990; Norwich, 2008a). Some theorists argue that labelling children and young people with SEN contradicts the ideals of inclusion and perpetuates the need for separate 'specialist' provision, further excluding students (Ainscow et al., 2013; Slee, 2018). The Dilemma of Difference suggests that accessing purely mainstream or purely specialist settings is not favourable in line with inclusion ideals, highlighting the need for more nuanced approaches (Norwich, 2008b; 2023).

2.3.1.1. An Integrative Position. One way to navigate this dilemma is through an integrative approach that transcends rigid positions on inclusion. Instead of viewing mainstream and specialist settings as opposing forces, Ravet (2011) posits that an Integrative Position operates 'in-between' the two positions, drawing them together to enhance potentials for inclusive education. This reflects a move away from polarised rights-based (equal access to mainstream) and needs-based (specialised provision) models, leading to a more nuanced understanding that acknowledges the importance of both in

achieving meaningful inclusion. By drawing on elements of both perspectives, effective practices towards the shared goal of inclusion can be highlighted (Ravet, 2011). In practice, this can be reflected as prioritising specialist training of pedagogies for students with specific SEN needs within mainstream settings (Robert & Simpson, 2016).

2.3.1.2. The Capability Approach. Originally developed by Sen (1999) in economic theory, the Capability Approach has increasingly been applied to inclusive education (Terzi, 2005). Two concepts fundamental to the Capability Approach are capabilities and functionings (Sen, 1992). It emphasises supporting students in developing capabilities (skills and valued actions and activities) and enabling them to achieve their functionings (realised capabilities) (Sen, 1999; Terzi, 2005). Nussbaum (2011) argues that a fair society ensures that all individuals have genuine opportunities to develop key capabilities, focusing on real freedoms rather than merely on one's rights or the distribution of resources alone. When the Capability Approach is applied to the inclusion of students with SEN, inclusion is not just about placement but about creating conditions where all students can participate in meaningful ways. This approach shares synergies with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (1979), as the Capability Approach acknowledges the influence of social and environmental factors on an individual's capacity to convert capabilities into functionings, i.e., conversion factors (Ballet et al., 2011; Kellock, 2020). For example, in relation to inclusion, it recognises the role of teachers at the microsystem level and wider policies at the macrosystem level in shaping students' opportunities to achieve their valued functionings (Kellock, 2020). It moves beyond the binary of mainstream versus specialist provision, instead

focusing on how students can attain meaningful educational outcomes in inclusive settings (Terzi, 2007). However, Pogge and Pogge (2002) argue for the need to contextualise the Capability Approach to prevent it from becoming overly abstract or individualised. In relation to inclusion and belonging, this underscores the necessity of understanding how broader external factors shape students' capacity to achieve valued outcomes.

2.3.1.3. SRPs as a 'Middle Ground' to Inclusion. The positioning of SRPs within inclusion debates remains contested. From one perspective, SRPs reflect elements of the medical model, as access depends on a diagnosis or EHCP to obtain specialist support, thereby reinforcing a deficit narrative (Glazzard, 2014). Another perspective is that SRPs attempt to reduce barriers to mainstream participation, reflecting the social model's emphasis on environmental and structural adaptations (Lindsay, 2003). This dual positioning reflects the long-standing Dilemma of Difference (Minow, 1990). SRPs could be seen as an attempt to address this dilemma by offering targeted support while maintaining access to the mainstream, aligning with Ravet's (2011) Integrative Position. While theories of inclusion provide a foundation for understanding students' access and participation in education, exploring SRPs through the lens of students' lived experiences offers insights into how SRPs function in practice and can help clarify whether they serve as a bridge toward inclusion or risk reinforcing separation. As such, theories of belonging provide a deeper understanding of the emotional and relational dimensions of students' experiences.

2.4 Theoretical Underpinnings of Belonging

Similar to inclusion, the conceptualisation of belonging is complex and lacks consensus within the literature. Belonging is understood from a variety of theoretical positions, contributing to the multiple conceptualisations of the construct (Allen et al., 2021). Mahar et al. (2013) argue that belonging is a multidimensional concept comprising many interacting elements. While many definitions emphasise the need for connection with others and acceptance within a specific space or group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), there is concern that a universally accepted definition may restrict understanding, due to the necessity of accounting for contextual variations when exploring belonging (Mahar et al., 2013). For instance, in secondary schools, belonging is also found to be shaped by school ethos (Allen & Kern, 2017). Fostering belonging in schools is complex and requires consideration of psychological, social, and systemic factors (Mahar et al., 2013).

2.4.1 Psychological and Social Theories of Belonging

Early conceptualisations of belonging emphasise its role as a basic human need essential for motivation and wellbeing (Maslow, 1943; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Baumeister and Leary's (1995) 'belongingness hypothesis' posits that individuals are inherently motivated to seek and maintain belonging through reciprocal, close relationships. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) identifies belonging (or 'psychological relatedness') as a fundamental need, the absence of which can adversely affect wellbeing and overall outcomes. However, these perspectives concentrate too narrowly on individual motivation, overlooking structural and environmental influences on belonging (Mahar et al., 2013).

Other psychological perspectives, such as Psychological Sense of Community (Sarason, 1974), highlight that belonging emerges through perceptions of being part of a supportive network or group. Similarly, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) emphasises the significance of ingroup membership in fostering a sense of belonging and identity, whereby individuals categorise themselves based on shared and differing characteristics. The ability to express one's true self within social groups is considered a key indicator of belonging (Mahar et al., 2013), with membership in multiple groups offering a protective factor for disempowered populations (Haslam et al., 2022). This has implications for students attending SRPs, as their membership in both the SRP and mainstream likely shapes their experiences of belonging and identity.

While these theories provide valuable insights, they largely focus on relational belonging and do not account for wider systemic influences (Allen & Kern, 2017). Given the complexities of belonging, an ecological perspective is necessary to understand how multiple interacting systems, particularly in school contexts, shape students' experiences.

2.4.2 Ecological and Interactionist Perspectives on Belonging

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) can be applied to understanding how belonging develops as part of a complex system. This theory recognises that belonging is shaped by multiple influences, from relationships with students, teachers, and family at the microsystemic level; to school policies, culture, and ethos at the mesosystem; to educational structures and LA policies at the ecosystem; and broader societal views along with SEN and educational policies at the macrosystem. This framework was later

expanded into the Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), culminating in the Process-Person-Context-Time model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which emphasises that the dynamic nature of the interactions between individuals and their environment over time continually shapes one's development. Importantly, this model emphasises that these influences are not one-directional, and development occurs through ongoing, reciprocal interactions and processes between the individual and their environment.

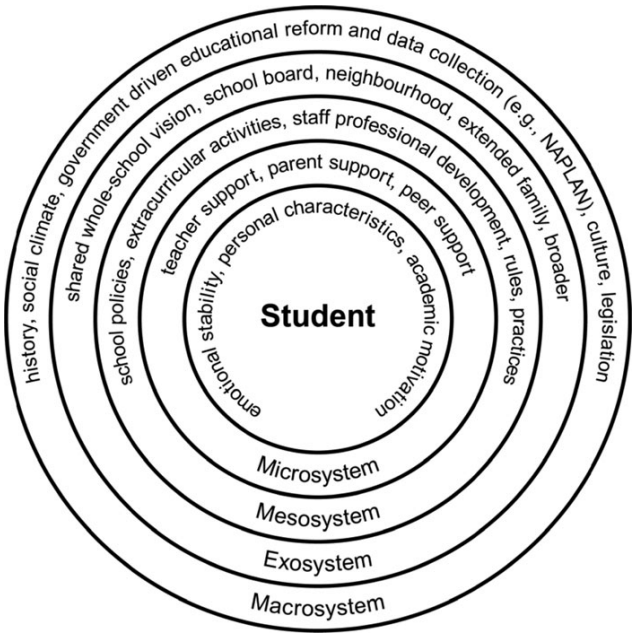
2.4.2.1. Bio-Psycho-Socio-Ecological Model of School Belonging.

When applied to school belonging, Allen et al. (2016) argue that Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model provides the most robust framework for exploring students' sense of belonging as it acknowledges the external influences that impact belonging. Extending Bronfenbrenner's work, Allen and Kern (2017) developed the Bio-Psycho-Socio-Ecological Model (BPSEM) from a review of the literature on school belonging, aiming to support secondary schools in fostering a sense of belonging. Allen and Kern (2017) contend that Bronfenbrenner's models highlight how external systems shape belonging, but that the BPSEM extends this by considering psychological and social factors, which, as outlined in Section 2.4.1, are key to belonging. The BPSEM integrates biological, psychological, and social factors, recognising that belonging is influenced by individual characteristics (e.g., motivation, individual needs), interpersonal relationships, school culture and policies, and the broader community, along with the political and economic contexts in which the individual resides (see Figure 2, from Allen & Kern, 2017). Unlike traditional models of belonging, the BPSEM emphasises the complex, bidirectional

interactions between these factors rather than suggesting that belonging results from a singular outcome.

Figure 2

Bio-Psycho-Socio-Ecological Model of School Belonging, from Allen & Kern, 2017

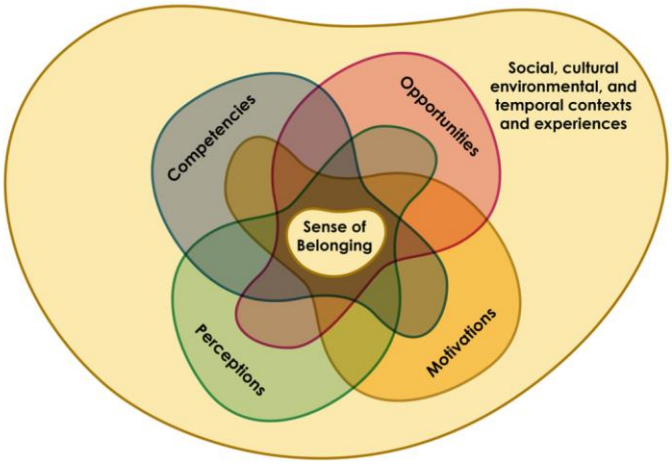


2.4.2.2. Integrative Framework for Belonging. Although Allen and Kern's (2017) BPSEM provides a valuable framework for exploring belonging in secondary schools, it may not sufficiently capture the subjective, lived experience of belonging. It can be argued that individuals remain somewhat passive or reactive within these models (Tudge et al., 2009). This limitation is particularly significant when considering the belonging of autistic students, where it is important to privilege autistic voices and perspectives (Milton, 2012). Developed from a synthesis of the literature, Allen et al. (2021) created the

Integrative Framework for Belonging to integrate key concepts from psychological, social, and ecological perspectives, emphasising the individual, dynamic nature of belonging, while also recognising the role of external contexts in shaping it. Allen et al. (2021) conceptualise belonging as a feeling and experience evolving from four interconnected components: competencies (skills and abilities to interact and develop connections), opportunities (availability of resources and possibilities to develop belonging), motivations (intrinsic drive to pursue interactions and relationships), and perceptions (individual's assessment of belonging) (See Figure 3, from Allen et al., 2021).

Figure 3

Integrative Framework for Belonging, from Allen et al., 2021



2.4.3 Conceptual Framework

To comprehensively explore belonging, this research adopts a holistic and interactionist perspective that considers both student experiences and systemic influences. Traditional belonging perspectives that focus primarily on

individual needs and motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943) are less suited to account sufficiently for the role of school structures in shaping belonging in inclusive education. This study draws upon two complementary models of belonging:

1. **Systemic lens - The BPSEM of School Belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017):** to consider the broader school, policy, and structural factors influencing belonging in SRPs within mainstream schools.
2. **Individual lens - The Integrative Framework for Belonging (Allen et al., 2021):** to explore students' individual experiences of belonging.

Each model provides unique yet interconnected insights for understanding the complexity of belonging for students attending SRPs.

The BPSEM (Allen & Kern, 2017) offers a socioecological and systems-based perspective that highlights the multi-level influences on belonging at school, including school practices and structures. This lens aids in evaluating how SRP and mainstream school contexts, policies, and cultures shape students' experiences of belonging. Although the BPSEM acknowledges psychological and social dimensions, its primary emphasis is on systemic and contextual influences. In contrast, the Integrative Framework (Allen et al., 2021) provides a more individual and dynamic conceptualisation of belonging, framed as a subjective and evolving experience. This focus on lived experience is important when exploring the belonging of autistic students, whose ways of engaging with, interpreting, and experiencing school environments may differ from those of neurotypical peers (Milton, 2012). Prioritising the autistic voice aligns with the commitment to valuing autistic experience in educational

research (Pellicano et al., 2022). Both models offer a holistic framework for exploring students' belonging in SRPs within mainstream schools.

2.4.4 Conceptual Framework and Inclusion

The conceptual framework for this study, which combines the BPSEM and the Integrative Framework, aligns closely with theoretical perspectives on inclusion. The BPSEM (Allen & Kern, 2017) reflects ideas drawn from the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013) and the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; Terzi, 2005), emphasising the role of school structures, practices, and policies in shaping students' sense of belonging. This model enables an examination of how SRPs either mitigate or reinforce systemic barriers to inclusion, resonating with the dilemmas highlighted in the Dilemma of Difference (Minow, 1990; Norwich, 2008a). While traditional models of inclusion emphasise access to mainstream settings, the Integrative Framework for Belonging (Allen et al., 2021) facilitates an exploration of how students perceive their inclusion and connection to the school environment. As outlined in Section 2.2, belonging serves as an experiential marker of meaningful inclusion, moving beyond placement to the lived realities of inclusion and participation, which can be explored through this framework.

2.5 Systemic and Environmental Influences on Belonging (BPSEM Lens)

This section draws on the BPSEM of school belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017) to explore research regarding the inclusion and belonging of autistic and SEN students attending mainstream secondary schools, with a focus on the systemic, environmental, and structural influences.

2.5.1 School Structures, Policies and Culture

At the macrosystem level, broader educational structures and cultural values, such as the UK's performance-driven and competitive ethos, shape how mainstream secondary schools deliver inclusion (Cefai & Cooper, 2010). Stringent accountability frameworks, an increasing emphasis on academic outcomes, and budget constraints have contributed to less favourable experiences for students with SEN, who in the academic year 2022/2023 were five times more likely to be permanently excluded than students without SEN (DfE, 2024b; Rainer et al., 2022). These pressures operate across both the macrosystem, including national education policy and the marketisation of education, and the exosystem, such as leadership decisions and resource allocations, influencing how inclusion is enacted at the school level and shaping students' school experiences (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Norwich, 2013).

2.5.2 Teacher Support and Practices

Teacher support and practice are situated within the microsystem of the BPSEM, where students engage in direct relationships with teachers and support staff (Allen & Kern, 2017). Given the challenges of tailoring mainstream teaching to students with SEN, schools rely heavily on TAs to facilitate inclusion (Horgan et al., 2023; Pinkard, 2021). While TAs provide valuable support, research highlights unintended negative consequences on student achievement and progress arising from reduced input from classroom teachers in the learning of students with SEN (Webster et al., 2013; Webster et al., 2015). Moreover, the social implications of TA proximity can reinforce stigma, with students expressing concerns that receiving TA support makes them feel different from their peers (Webster & Blatchford, 2019), echoing the Dilemma of

Difference (Norwich, 2013). Nonetheless, other studies suggest that students rely on TAs to facilitate other aspects of inclusion, such as social participation and belonging (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Pinkard, 2021). Furthermore, research shows that positive student-teacher relationships are important in promoting belonging (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020), with teacher interactions found to have the strongest correlation with belonging in a study of 15-year-olds across 41 countries (Chiu et al., 2016).

2.5.2.1. Ability Grouping. Ability grouping, situated within the mesosystem, mediates students' relationships with their school environment, influencing the inclusivity or exclusivity of their school experience (Allen & Kern, 2017). Blatchford and Webster's (2018) large-scale observational study found that students with SEN are often placed in low-attainment groups. While these placements aim to provide additional support, research indicates they may reinforce low expectations and social stigma (Webster & Blatchford, 2017). For some students, such placements are linked with feelings of marginalisation rather than inclusion, challenging the assumption that physical placement alone equates to meaningful participation and reinforcing exclusionary social norms embedded within the macrosystem (Allen & Kern, 2017).

2.5.3 Peer Relationships and Social Inclusion

Peer relationships are a central element of the microsystem and play a key role in shaping how students with SEN perceive their place in mainstream schools (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). While peer acceptance and friendships are identified as key facilitators of belonging for autistic and SEN students (Horgan et al., 2023; Subban et al., 2022), negative peer interactions, such as social exclusion, bullying, or a lack of understanding from peers, can hinder

students' sense of connection (Bouchard & Berg, 2017; McCoy & Banks, 2012). The literature reveals that students with SEN report poor peer relationships (Dolton et al., 2020; Horgan et al., 2023) and increased instances of bullying compared to their peers (Goodall & MacKenzie, 2019; Ware, 2020). Additionally, the structural barriers outlined, such as the constant presence of TAs, frequent withdrawal from mainstream lessons (Webster & Blatchford, 2014), and a general lack of peer awareness or acceptance of difference (Jones & Frederickson, 2010; Landor & Perepa, 2017), further hinder social inclusion.

Collectively, the studies presented in this section demonstrate how structures and interactions at the macro-, exo-, meso-, and microsystem levels influence the inclusion and sense of belonging of autistic students in mainstream schools. However, a notable limitation of the BPSEM in this context is its under-representation of autistic students' subjective experiences and perspectives (Milton, 2012). The Integrative Framework for Belonging (Allen et al., 2021) provides further insight into students' lived experiences.

2.6 Individual Experience of Belonging (Integrative Framework Lens)

While systemic structures play a significant role in shaping belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017), students' experiences of connection, acceptance, and value can indicate authentic inclusion. This section draws on Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework to explore students' sense of belonging in mainstream secondary schools.

2.6.1 Competencies for Belonging

Allen et al. (2021) position competencies as the individual abilities required to form connections and engage socially. For autistic students, the development of these competencies is often hindered by differences in social communication and interaction styles. Within the literature, autistic students report greater social isolation and weaker peer relationships compared to their mainstream peers (Locke et al., 2010; O'Hagan & Hebron, 2017).

Moreover, autistic students' competencies are further influenced by their social and sensory environments. Studies reveal that the anxiety and sensory overwhelm associated with social interactions make engaging with peers difficult in mainstream settings, leading to avoidance and reinforcing isolation (Bailey & Baker, 2020; Black et al., 2024). Additionally, sensory sensitivities and environmental stressors heighten anxiety and isolation for autistic students, limiting their ability to access social opportunities that can foster a sense of belonging (Goodall, 2018). Interestingly, according to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belongingness hypothesis, while friendships are important, belonging does not necessarily require strong friendships; even loose social ties or acknowledgement can contribute to a sense of connection. This nuance suggests that traditional notions of competencies for belonging, e.g., autistic students' social skills and capabilities, are often based on neurotypical social norms and may require greater flexibility to authentically capture the diverse ways in which autistic students experience and express belonging.

2.6.2 Opportunities for Belonging

Opportunities refer to the actual, accessible chances students have to connect, participate, and belong (Allen et al., 2021). For autistic students, the quality and accessibility of such opportunities vary considerably. Research identifies key factors that can enhance autistic students' experiences of mainstream education, including positive peer relationships, feeling valued, supportive teachers, and access to safe spaces to retreat from overwhelming stimuli (Goodall, 2020; Humphrey & Symes, 2013). However, research finds that the mainstream school environment presents numerous challenges that exclude, stigmatise, and overwhelm autistic individuals (Botha et al., 2022; Goodall, 2018). Notably, the supportive elements of belonging, including positive relationships and safe spaces (Goodall, 2020; Humphrey & Symes, 2013), align closely with the core features of SRPs, which provide a predictable environment and a safe haven for students that could facilitate greater opportunities for belonging.

2.6.3 Motivation to Belong

Motivation to belong refers to the intrinsic drive to seek relationships and social connections (Allen et al., 2021). For autistic students, motivation is complicated by the negative experiences of stigma and marginalisation that can lead them to either mask their autistic traits in social situations to fit in with non-autistic peers (Hull et al., 2017; Livingston et al., 2019) or avoid social situations to protect their sense of self (Perry et al., 2022). Studies suggest that autistic students who feel excluded or different are more likely to engage in camouflaging to make friendships and 'fit in' (Atkinson et al., 2025). Myles et al. (2019), in a study of eight adolescent autistic girls, found that participants

engaged in camouflaging to feel a sense of belonging among their non-autistic peers. Similarly, Porter and Ingram (2021, p. 69), in a survey of 108 secondary school female students with SEN, found that participants actively concealed their “quirky bits” to achieve a sense of belonging, which ultimately negatively impacted their wellbeing. These findings underscore the psychological cost of camouflaging; yet existing research has primarily focused on female students, necessitating further investigation across all genders. Additionally, drawing on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), if autistic individuals perceive themselves as part of an ‘outgroup’, they may internalise stigma or attempt to distance themselves from their autistic identity, thus reducing motivation to seek social connection (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Perry et al., 2022).

2.6.4 Perceptions of Belonging

Perception refers to how students subjectively assess their sense of connection and belonging (Allen et al., 2021). Research highlights that autistic students’ perceptions of belonging are shaped by their social comparisons to peers and attempts to mask aspects of their identity, as described in the previous section (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Williams et al., 2019). Students often internalise their perceptions of difference, which contributes further to marginalisation and a lack of belonging within mainstream schools (Horgan et al., 2023). This is particularly relevant for students in SRPs, who manage two environments, whereby their perceptions of belonging may change in each context. Halsall et al.’s (2021) study on the camouflaging of autistic female students in SRPs presents mixed findings, with some students feeling more accepted in SRPs while others reported camouflaging in both settings. This raises important questions about how SRPs foster belonging or inadvertently

reinforce the need to mask behaviours. It is therefore important to examine how students in SRPs navigate their perceived sense of belonging in both mainstream and SRP settings.

2.6.5 Social, Cultural, Environmental and Temporal Contexts and Experiences

Allen et al. (2021) summarise belonging as resulting from the interaction and evolution of the four outlined components over time, across social contexts and environments. As presented in the framework, factors such as the mainstream environment, peer relationships, and access to safe spaces interact to shape students' experiences (Humphrey & Symes, 2010). The research suggests that belonging in mainstream schools can be highly precarious for autistic students, emphasising the need to further understand how belonging can be supported in mainstream environments.

The preceding sections have demonstrated that autistic students' sense of belonging is influenced by both systemic structures and individual experiences, as conceptualised through the BPSEM (Allen & Kern, 2017) and the Integrative Framework (Allen et al., 2021). However, most research focuses on mainstream settings, where autistic students often face significant barriers to inclusion. Considering the rights of autistic students to mainstream education under inclusion policies and the potential academic and social benefits of mainstream inclusion, it is important to examine alternative inclusive educational models such as SRPs (Bond & Hebron, 2016). Viewed through the BPSEM lens (Allen & Kern, 2017), SRPs operate within the broader systemic structures that influence other systems surrounding the student to facilitate belonging, for instance, by providing a quiet space away from the

overwhelming mainstream environment. The Integrative Framework's (Allen et al., 2021) dynamic, context-dependent perspective on belonging offers a lens to explore how students from the SRP experience belonging across both mainstream and SRP contexts.

2.7 Specially Resourced Provisions

SRPs have emerged as a potential solution to the challenges of including students with SEN in mainstream schools, offering specialist support and interventions while maintaining access to mainstream learning (DfE, 2015a; Bond et al., 2017). Increased opportunities for students to interact with their mainstream peers and vice versa are thought to assist in developing awareness and appreciation of differences in society (Halsall et al., 2021). Research in the UK indicates that SRPs are a favourable option among parents of autistic students (Hebron & Bond, 2017; Landor & Perepa, 2017). Hebron and Bond (2017) conducted a longitudinal study interviewing 16 parents across five primary and three secondary SRPs during their child's first year attending the SRP, with findings highlighting strengths in staff expertise and opportunities to facilitate inclusion. Landor and Perepa's (2017) study, using closed and open-ended questionnaires with eight parents of autistic students attending a secondary SRP, found that parents selected the school based on the additional support their child would receive. However, research concerning students' experiences of attending SRPs, particularly within mainstream secondary schools, remains limited. There is a gap in understanding how students experience belonging within both the SRP and the mainstream school context (Strogilos & Ward, 2024). Drawing on the BPSEM (Allen & Kern, 2017) and the

Integrative Framework (Allen et al., 2021), this section explores how SRPs support or hinder students' experiences of inclusion and belonging.

2.7.1 Inclusion in SRPs

Through the BPSEM of school belonging (Allen & Kern, 2017), SRPs serve as systemic structures (i.e., microsystem) designed to influence students' immediate environments and promote inclusion and belonging. Additionally, the BPSEM offers a framework for examining the systemic and environmental impacts of SRPs (i.e., mesosystem).

A key feature of SRPs is the presence of specialist staff who deliver interventions tailored to students' needs, support students within mainstream lessons, and can advise mainstream teachers on inclusive classroom practices (Landor & Perepa, 2017; Strogilos & Ward, 2024). This high level of adult support and expertise is particularly valued by parents, who perceive SRPs as providing a level of individualised attention that may be lacking in fully mainstream settings (Landor & Perepa, 2017). However, research highlights ongoing challenges in collaboration between SRP and mainstream staff. In Strogilos and Ward's (2024) study across four primary SRP settings, teachers relied on TAs to differentiate the work, reinforcing concerns about TA-mediated inclusion (Webster, 2022). Furthermore, Bond and Hebron's (2016) study of five primary and three secondary SRPs found that SRP staff frequently felt disconnected from mainstream colleagues, raising concerns about whether SRPs truly facilitate whole-school inclusion or function as isolated units. This may be more prevalent in secondary settings, where teachers have expertise in specific subjects and are positioned within that department; similarly, SRP staff have expertise in supporting students with SEN, contributing to the confusion in

accountability for the students (Dukes & Lamar-Dukes, 2006; De Vroey et al., 2016). Further exploration of collaboration between secondary school staff in supporting students from the SRP would offer more insight into this area.

The subsequent challenges of implementing inclusion within SRPs in mainstream schools raise questions about the necessity of such separate provisions (Frederickson et al., 2010). Frederickson and colleagues' (2010) study of 26 primary schools revealed that while strategies employed to support autistic learners in schools with and without SRPs were similar, schools with SRPs uniquely prioritised systemic and preventative work, including social skills development and academic catch-up, in addition to providing a predictable, low-stimulation environment for social and emotional support.

2.7.2 Belonging in SRPs

While a systemic perspective highlights structural factors that shape inclusion and belonging experiences, the Integrative Framework (Allen et al., 2021) helps emphasise the experiences of belonging for students attending SRPs.

2.7.2.1 Friendships and Peer Relationships (Competencies & Opportunities). The competencies and opportunities for belonging within SRPs are closely tied to peer relationships. Research on the friendships of students attending an SRP highlights the unique role of the SRP in facilitating peer connections by providing a safe, structured space where students feel comfortable socialising (Holt et al., 2012; O'Hagan & Hebron, 2017; Warren et al., 2020). While this is noted as a strength of SRPs, the research presents mixed findings regarding the extent to which these friendships extend into the

mainstream environment. Some studies found that students who attended an SRP primarily formed friendships with one another and had limited social interactions with their mainstream peers (O'Hagan & Hebron, 2017; Warren et al., 2020). In contrast, Strogilos and Ward's (2024) research of four primary SRP settings reported that, although the students had fewer friendships, many of these occurred with peers in their mainstream classes.

Differences in where friendships are established may be influenced by factors such as time spent within the mainstream (Landor & Perepa, 2017) and the individual needs of students. For example, autistic students often prefer to form friendships with peers who share similar experiences (Crane & Pellicano, 2022). The location of the SRP, whether in a primary or secondary school, might also affect peer relations, as older children tend to express less positive attitudes towards peers with SEN (Georgiadi et al., 2012; Tang et al., 2000). Despite these complexities, research consistently highlights that meaningful friendships play an important role in fostering a sense of belonging, reinforcing the need for SRPs to prioritise peer relationships (O'Hagan & Hebron, 2017).

2.7.2.2 Identity and 'Othering' (Motivations & Perceptions). Being part of an SRP in a mainstream school can impact students' understanding of their identity, shaping their experiences of belonging. Halsall et al.'s study (2021) explored camouflaging experiences of eight autistic girls attending an SRP. Some of the students described altering aspects of their identity when accessing the mainstream school, while others resisted being perceived as similar to their peers who also attended the SRP (Halsall et al., 2021). While some students find security in the SRP, it can also create a sense of difference and othering, reinforcing 'outgroup' feelings of exclusion from the wider school

community (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). Laws et al. (2012) found that primary-aged students attending an SRP experienced higher levels of peer rejection than their typically developing classmates, with peer acceptance increasing once they transitioned to full-time mainstream placement. This raises questions about whether SRPs genuinely facilitate social inclusion or reinforce exclusionary practices. Conversely, some studies argue that SRPs foster belonging by providing a protective sense of ingroup membership, where students share common experiences and feel valued (Warren et al., 2020). Such perceptions of difference among the students reflect the Dilemma of Difference and provoke debate on the use of these provisions to facilitate belonging and inclusion (Nilholm, 2006).

While SRPs aim to support inclusion by providing a specialist environment and targeted interventions (BPSEM lens), their effectiveness also hinges on students' subjective experiences of belonging (Integrative Framework lens). Systemic barriers such as poor collaboration and challenges in accessing mainstream provisions can hinder the realisation of belonging. Although SRPs may cultivate belonging through peer connections, they may also reinforce social separation, raising questions about the role of SRPs in promoting inclusion (Norwich, 2013). Understanding SRPs thus necessitates an integrated and holistic approach that captures student experiences while also accounting for broader systemic factors.

2.8 Autistic Voice

There is increasing recognition that autistic individuals are experts in their own lives; yet autism research has traditionally been dominated by neurotypical perspectives (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Recent shifts in autism research advocate for prioritising the interests of autistic communities and ensuring that research aligns with their needs and priorities (Den Houting et al., 2021). This includes actively involving autistic individuals in research to ensure their voices are authentically represented (Pellicano et al., 2022). To meaningfully involve autistic students, research methods should be adapted to their needs, ensuring the research process is accessible and inclusive (Milton et al., 2019). Participatory research approaches provide a framework for achieving this, promoting meaningful engagement of those often disempowered in the research process.

2.8.1 Participatory Research Method Approaches

The shift towards the importance of pupil voice has driven research to move beyond merely listening to children's views and towards actively including them in the research process (Archard & Uniacke, 2021; Christensen & James, 2008). Participatory research methods actively involve and empower participants at multiple stages of the research (Hill et al., 2016). Frameworks such as Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation and Shier's (2001) Pathway of Participation provide useful models for assessing the extent of meaningful participation and how children can be genuinely involved without being 'tokenistic'. Hart's (1992) model outlines eight steps for involving young people in research, ranging from non-participation to meaningful engagement. Each step emphasises the necessary progression towards authentic participation.

Shier's (2001) model broadens this focus by highlighting the researcher's role in promoting participation. Participatory methods remain a developing area of research, and there is growing recognition that if researchers are to genuinely represent students with SEN, more attention should be given to identifying effective approaches for engagement and communication (Facca et al., 2020). However, achieving genuine participatory research presents numerous time, ethical, and monetary challenges (Davis, 2009). A flexible approach that incorporates participatory methods at different stages of research can help navigate these challenges while ensuring that student voice remains authentic and impactful rather than symbolic (Hill et al., 2016).

2.9 Aims and Research Questions

The study aimed to explore how students attending SRPs for autism and/or SLCN within mainstream secondary schools experience belonging. While SRPs are designed to support inclusion through specialist support and access to mainstream education, successful inclusion in SRPs cannot be understood through placement and access alone. Belonging provides a rich lens to evaluate inclusion, capturing its relational, emotional, and psychological dimensions (Prince & Hadwin, 2013).

To explore this complexity, the study drew on Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework and Allen and Kern's (2017) BPSEM to examine belonging at both the individual and systemic levels. This study addresses a gap in the literature by capturing student voice to explore belonging experiences across both SRP and mainstream settings. Additionally, it includes

perspectives from both SRP and mainstream staff, a previously unexplored viewpoint in secondary SRPs, addressing the bridging function of SRPs to offer insights into how they support or constrain inclusive practice. The research questions (RQs) were:

1. How do students attending an SRP in a mainstream secondary school experience belonging?
2. How do students attending an SRP experience belonging within the SRP and mainstream settings?
3. What facilitates belonging for students attending an SRP in mainstream secondary schools?

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Position

Ontology refers to the philosophical study of the nature of existence or reality (Swain, 2016). The researcher's position influences the research process, including research design, methodology, and analysis (Crotty, 1998). Ontologically, this study adopts a social constructionist perspective that asserts that reality is not objective or fixed but is constructed through interactions between individuals in their environments within a social context (Bryman, 2016). From this viewpoint, social, historical, and political contexts shape reality, and individuals' experiences are formed within these socially produced structures (Burr, 2015). Consequently, students' experiences of belonging are neither fixed nor universal, but are constructed differently within specific social contexts.

While ontology addresses beliefs about the nature of existence, epistemology focuses on how knowledge of that reality is obtained (Crotty, 1998). This research reflects an interpretivist epistemology, which recognises the subjective understanding and interpretation of social phenomena. It centres on how individuals or groups make sense of their experiences, interactions, and the world around them. An interpretivist approach concerns how one describes their experience within a particular situation or setting (Bryman, 2016). This is suitable given that this study explores students' experiences of belonging, which can be understood as subjective social phenomena occurring as experienced by an individual (Searle, 2006). Understanding belonging necessitates engaging with the meanings individuals attach to their experiences, recognising the influence of context, relationships, and discourse.

In this study, the social constructionist stance recognises the social processes and influences that shape students' experiences of belonging, while the interpretivist position deepens this understanding by recognising how each individual perceives and makes sense of their experiences. This integrated approach acknowledges that broader contexts construct social realities, while also focusing on comprehending the individual's process of meaning-making and interpretation within these realities (Schwandt, 2000).

3.2 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

In alignment with the social constructionist and interpretivist paradigms of this study, knowledge is understood as co-constructed between the researcher and the participants. It is important to acknowledge my personal, social, and cultural contexts and how these may shape the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

As a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), my practice is centred on a strong commitment to promoting pupil voice and including students with SEND. My previous roles as a TA, teacher, and SEND lead in both specialist and mainstream schools, including a secondary school with an SRP, have shaped my understanding of inclusion and how various school settings support neurodivergent learners. I recognise that these experiences have influenced my views and beliefs regarding inclusive practices, and thus how I interpreted participants' perspectives and engaged with the research (Finlay, 2002). Working as a TEP within an LA, I was aware of the power dynamics that may have affected how the participants perceived me. Teachers might have seen me as someone evaluating their practice, while students could have perceived

me as an authority figure, potentially impacting their comfort and authenticity in participating in the study (Berger, 2015).

I also acknowledge that I do not consider myself to be neurodivergent. This may have affected how the students engaged with the research and my ability to fully understand their lived experiences, reflecting the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012). To help mitigate this, I adopted an advocacy stance that aimed to centre student voice throughout and drew on principles from participatory approaches, as further discussed in Section 3.5.1.1.

This study's social constructionist and interpretivist stance acknowledges the researcher's values, beliefs, and experiences, rejecting the notion of a value-free or neutral stance (Creswell, 2013). Recognising the active role the researcher plays and aiming to enhance rigour and credibility, I engaged in reflexivity (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity involves continuous, critical self-evaluation and acknowledgement of how positionality may influence the research (Berger, 2015). I maintained self-awareness and ongoing reflection by documenting in a reflexive diary, recording reflections after each interview, observation, and during the data analysis process (Ortlipp, 2008). I considered how my positionality affected interactions, initial interpretations of participant responses, and emotional reactions. While the diary was not a source of data, it supported reflexive engagement and transparency throughout data collection and analysis. An excerpt from the reflexive diary is provided in Appendix B. Additionally, this study followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (rTA), which is further discussed in Section 3.6.

3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Qualitative Design

The purpose of this study was to explore how students attending SRPs in mainstream schools experienced belonging. Aligned with the social constructionist and interpretivist position, I recognised that an individual's experience of their social world, shaped by unique interactions, does not conform to restrictive classifications or categories. Therefore, the research adopted a qualitative style of investigation, which is concerned with understanding aspects of human experience and promotes methods centred on human interaction (Bryman, 2016). Qualitative methods, such as interviews and observations, allow the researcher to engage directly in the meaning-making process. A qualitative approach views the researcher's influence as an important aspect of the research process that deepens understanding (Gough & Madill, 2012). The process of reflexivity ensured that this was examined and contributed thoughtfully to the study (Finlay, 2002).

3.3.2 Case Study

Given the limited research in this area, this study adopted an exploratory case study research design (Yin, 1994). A case study design enables a deep understanding of real-life phenomena, allowing insight into how individuals understand their experiences and derive meaning within a specific context, aligning with the study's ontological and epistemological stance (Merriam, 2015). Case study designs are particularly effective in exploring how individuals make sense of experiences from multiple perspectives in complex real-world settings. This design facilitated a rich exploration of the two SRPs, incorporating the perspectives of both students and staff.

A multiple case study design was adopted to explore the inclusion of students in two SRPs in mainstream secondary schools in an inner-city LA. The strengths of case study designs lie in the rich, detailed data and insights they provide about a person, group, or setting in real-world environments or situations (Yin, 2009). Including two SRPs enabled an exploration of both shared and contrasting approaches, offering broader insight into how SRPs operate and facilitate inclusion. Within the literature, case study designs can be subject to criticism, including the generation of excessive information and limitations related to researcher influence, as well as reliability and generalisability issues (Merriam, 1985). This research design does not seek to generalise findings consistent with a quantitative approach but rather increase the opportunity for theory generalisation (Thomas, 2011). Additionally, I have taken steps to reduce these limitations, including implementing researcher reflexivity and adhering to a process of trustworthiness discussed in Section 3.7.1.

3.3.3 Profile of Schools and SRPs

This section provides an overview of the two participating mainstream secondary schools and their associated SRPs, including context on their structure, ethos, and inclusion practices relevant to the study.

3.3.3.1. Rosehill School and Willow SRP[1]. Rosehill is a mixed gender mainstream secondary school in an inner London borough with approximately 800 to 900 students enrolled. The school is a faith-based school that serves a diverse and urban population, with a higher than average proportion of students with SEND. The school has a reputation in the local area of being an inclusive

[1] Some details within the descriptions of the SRPs have been omitted to protect anonymity.

school for students with SEND. The proportion of students eligible for free school meals is above the national average. Rosehill School's ethos is rooted in the teachings of its faith tradition, which emphasises an inclusive and nurturing environment where every student feels valued and receives personalised learning tailored to their individual needs. The school's behaviour policy follows a firm but restorative approach, combining clear sanctions with a strong emphasis on reflection, relationship repair, and personal responsibility.

Willow is the school's autism SRP, commissioned by the LA as part of its strategic planning for SEND provision, to provide targeted support for students with an EHCP and a diagnosis of autism, SLCN, or a social communication disorder as their primary area of need. There are 46 students in Willow from Year 7 to Year 13, which is at the SRP's capacity. This figure is determined by LA commissioning and funding agreements, in line with the local approach to inclusion outlined by the DfE in Chapter 1 (2015a). Placement in Willow is determined by the LA's multi-agency placement panel and is based on students' individual needs and placement specification within their EHCP. Willow is located on the ground floor, in the left wing of the school. Willow includes two common areas, staff offices, outdoor spaces, and multiple small classrooms used for individual or small group teaching and interventions. The SRP includes some calm and sensory-supportive spaces. The students also use Willow during unstructured times, such as break and lunchtime, to socialise, eat, and access computers and IT facilities.

Willow operates a tiered system of support whereby students are supported in accessing the mainstream to varying degrees. The tiered system is informed by local guidance and reflects internal decision-making, drawing on

principles from the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015b) encouraging mainstream inclusion wherever possible based on students' individual needs. Many of the students attend most lessons in mainstream with TA support, while other students access some mainstream lessons and receive more 1:1 to small group teaching within Willow. In this case, teachers from the mainstream school, in consultation with the staff from the SRP, deliver subject-specific 1:1 or small group teaching where needed. For students who may be struggling to access learning in the mainstream environment, Willow may offer more opportunities for 1:1 or small group teaching in the SRP based on that student's needs. This means some students are taught most of their lessons in Willow by mainstream teachers. All students in Willow have access to specialist interventions, such as speech and language therapy (SALT), therapeutic interventions, occupational therapy, and social skills support.

The SRP staff team includes a Head of the SRP and SRP coordinators, who are responsible for overseeing the operation of the SRP, and make decisions regarding students' timetables, for example, whether a student requires more lessons within Willow. The staff team also includes several TAs, some of whom have specialisms, including trained Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs[2]). Students in Willow are also assigned a keyworker for continuity and home-school communication. TAs also provide in-class support and lead interventions in Willow. The staffing ratio varies as provision is tailored to students' individual needs, for example, some students do not need TA support in lessons, and others may need all teaching delivered in small groups

[2] ELSAs are specially trained teaching assistants who work in schools (mainly in the UK) to support children's emotional and social development (Burton, 2008). They are trained by EPs to run interventions to support children and young people recognise, understand, and manage their emotions.

in Willow, meaning there will be a higher staff-to-student ratio. External therapists and professionals frequently visit Willow to provide intervention and support for students as specified within their EHCPs.

While Willow is part of Rosehill's wider SEND provision, it operates with a degree of independence in its day-to-day management. The SEND department provides support for students with a range of SEND, with and without an EHCP, and is led by the school's SENCo. The Head of Willow and the SENCo are line-managed by a member of the Senior Leadership Team who is responsible for Inclusion and SEND. However, staff within Willow do not support students from the SEND department who are not placed within the SRP and vice versa. Collaboration between Willow and the SEND department occurs infrequently through informal lines of communication and whole-school CPD, with staff within Willow receiving separate specialist training. Although the two departments operate separately on a day-to-day basis, their work is united by a shared ethos of inclusion for students with SEND. There is no allocated time for joint working and planning between Willow and other mainstream departments and staff.

Rosehill School's inclusive ethos is visible in certain school systems. For example, through the flexible timetabling and support offered to students from Willow, and a visible presence of SRP staff and students across the school. However, despite an inclusive mission statement, Willow functions largely separately from other departments in the mainstream school, with limited involvement in whole-school decisions, such as curriculum adaptation for students from Willow.

3.3.3.2. Northgate School and Arc SRP. Northgate School is a mixed

gender mainstream secondary school located in an inner London borough with between 1200 to 1300 students on roll. Northgate School supports a diverse, urban community and has a proportion of students with SEND and those eligible for free school meals that exceeds the national averages. Northgate School's ethos is centred on respect, inclusion, and high aspirations, fostering a nurturing and supportive environment where every individual is valued, differences are celebrated, and both students and staff are encouraged to strive for excellence. The school's behaviour policy follows a restorative and structured approach that emphasises positive relationships, clear expectations, and reflection to promote lasting behavioural change.

Arc is an SRP in Northgate School that is commissioned by the LA to provide support for students with an EHCP who have a diagnosis of autism and/or SLCN. Currently, 28 students attend Arc from Year 7 to sixth form, which is at placement capacity as determined by the LA. Students at Arc receive a place through the LA's placement panel based on their needs as specified within their EHCP. Arc is located on the second floor of the school and can be accessed by two doors; one connected directly to the mainstream school and the other to a staircase reserved for Arc staff and students. Arc has a large common area, sensory room and 4 classrooms, each of which are committed areas for interventions such as ELSA and SALT. There is also an office for the Head of Arc and a staff area that includes computers for staff to work on.

Students in Arc are expected to attend all mainstream lessons and receive TA support in 23 out of 25 lessons, with support provided across all subjects except PE. Arc's emphasis on full mainstream access is informed by both the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015b) and the schools' emphasis on

inclusion and high expectations for all students. Arc is used to access interventions as specified within the students' EHCPs, during unstructured times such as break and lunch times, and during assessments. The students do not access direct subject teaching in Arc, reflecting the school's policy emphasis on inclusion. All students in Arc have access to specialist interventions, such as SALT, ELSA, social skills support, and academic interventions as outlined within the students' EHCP provision. Interventions are run by the appropriate external professional, e.g., a Speech and Language therapist or TAs who have been trained to deliver specific interventions, e.g., social communication groups.

The SRP staff team consists of the Head of Arc, who oversees the operation of the SRP, and several TAs, who provide in-lesson support, deliver interventions, and fulfil the keyworker role, ensuring effective home-school communication. The staffing ratio of in-lesson support varies depending on the students' level of need. Year 11s are prioritised in terms of support as an exam year. Arc does not have dedicated teaching staff; all subject teaching takes place in mainstream lessons, in line with the school's full inclusion model. The Arc's resourcing, including staffing and interventions, is funded via top-up allocations linked to EHCP provision.

Northgate School has a separate SEND department, which the Arc operates independently from. However, the Senior Leadership Team involve both the Head of Arc and SENCo, who oversees the SEND department, in weekly SEND and Inclusion meetings, reflecting a whole-school commitment to inclusion. Arc offers an 'outreach' service to students who attend the mainstream school who have additional needs and would benefit from

accessing some aspects of Arc. These students do not access all aspects of Arc, e.g., interventions, but may use Arc as a safe space, for example. This operates on a flexible approach based on students' individual needs. During weekly SEND and Inclusion meetings, staff identify potential students for outreach support and review the progress of those already receiving this support. Apart from agreed outreach support, staff within Arc do not support students from the SEND department and vice versa.

Northgate School's inclusive ethos is seen through its emphasis on mainstream inclusion for all students, including those attending Arc who follow full mainstream timetables with TA support. While Northgate's vision promotes inclusion of students from Arc, a lack of dedicated time for collaboration between Arc and mainstream departments limits opportunities to enact shared inclusive practices. Arc staff hold drop-in sessions at the start of each year to help mainstream staff get to know Arc students and discuss appropriate strategies and support. However, these sessions are voluntary, and teachers may choose whether or not to attend.

3.4 Participants

This study employed purposive, criterion-based sampling to ensure that participants were well-positioned to provide insights into the phenomenon. Two mainstream secondary schools with autism and/or SLCN SRPs within the same LA took part: Willow, an SRP in Rosehill School, and Arc, an SRP in Northgate School. The schools were recruited by contacting secondary schools with SRPs within my LA placement to seek interest in participating. Overall, 19 participants took part across both settings. This included:

- Three sixth form students from Willow, who had experience attending the SRP, participated as the 'Research Group' during the planning phases, offering insights as experts by experience.
- Eight students attending the SRPs (four from Willow and four from Arc) from Years 7 to 13, participated in the main study.
- Eight staff members, comprising four from each school (two SRP staff and two mainstream teachers), participated in interviews.

3.4.1 Research Group Participants

The Research Group consisted of three sixth-form students from Willow at Rosehill School. Each student had over five years of experience attending the SRP and mainstream lessons. All students were male and had a diagnosis of autism. Please see Table 1 for demographic information. Further details about the Research Group can be found in Section 3.5.1.3.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information: Research Group

School (SRP)	Name	Year Group	Gender	Ethnicity	Diagnosis	Year entered SRP
Rosehill (Willow)	Thomas	Year 12	Male	White British	Autism	Year 7
Rosehill (Willow)	Joseph	Year 13	Male	Black Other	Autism	Year 8
Rosehill (Willow)	Drew	Year 12	Male	White British	Autism	Year 7

3.4.2 Student Participants

A total of eight students participated in the main phase of the study across the two schools. Students were identified in collaboration with the SRP leads based on the inclusion criteria: enrolled in the SRP, in Years 7 to 13, with an EHCP and a primary diagnosis of autism and/or SLCN. As outlined in Table 2 below, students came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, with a mix of genders and school years, including at least one student from each year group. All students had an EHCP with autism and/or SLCN listed as their primary need, and some had co-occurring diagnoses such as ADHD. While formal data on other additional SEN were not systematically collected, SRP staff reported that some students had additional areas of need, including sensory, attention, and regulation differences.

In addition to meeting the criteria outlined above, staff used professional judgement to identify students likely to feel comfortable participating, ensuring that participation was ethical, appropriate, and responsive to students' communication and support needs. Once potential participants were identified, SRP staff introduced the study using a visual information sheet. When students expressed interest, parents or carers were contacted to seek consent. Written consent was obtained from all participants before participation, ensuring the process was voluntary, informed, and responsive to the needs of students. Participant information sheets and consent forms can be found in Appendices C-E.

Students' educational experiences varied, including the degree of support students accessed through the SRP and the time spent in mainstream. This ranged from some students accessing mainstream teaching independently

without TA support to those who spent a significant amount of time in the SRP, where they received most of their teaching. This also differed based on whether the students attended Willow or Arc. Short pen portraits of each student are provided below:

3.4.2.1. Otto. Otto is a Year 8 student at Willow SRP. He is from a White European background and speaks English as an additional language. Otto has a diagnosis of autism and began attending Willow in Year 7. Otto enjoys Art and is academically able. He attends mainstream lessons independently, without adult support. Although independent in mainstream lessons, Otto relies on Willow for emotional and sensory regulation and uses it regularly during breaks and lunchtimes. His transition into secondary school was initially difficult, with high expectations in lessons and challenges with emotional regulation, but he has since settled well.

3.4.2.2. Sza. Sza is a Year 9 student with a diagnosis of autism. He transitioned from a specialist primary school and joined Willow in Year 7. Sza enjoys listening to music and drawing. He currently attends mainstream classes with TA support and receives teaching and interventions within the SRP. Sza socialises across both the SRP and mainstream settings and has established friendships with peers in both the SRP and mainstream. He accesses Willow at break and lunch to socialise with his friends.

3.4.2.3. Jeff. Jeff is a Year 11 student at Willow SRP and has a diagnosis of autism. Jeff's favourite hobby is playing video games. Since joining Willow in Year 7, Jeff has spent the majority of his time at school in the mainstream environment, where he accesses lessons with TA support. Most of his friendships are within the mainstream, and he prefers to spend social time

there. Although he maintains positive relationships with SRP staff, he mainly uses the SRP for interventions as specified within his EHCP.

3.4.2.4. Nadia. Nadia is a Year 13 student with a diagnosis of autism. Nadia enjoys History and roller skating. She joined Rosehill School and Willow SRP in Year 10 after facing attendance difficulties at a previous mainstream secondary school. When Nadia started attending Willow, she began accessing lessons in the mainstream. However, Nadia found the mainstream environment overwhelming due to both sensory and social differences, and now accesses all of her teaching in Willow. She currently attends a small number of A-Level classes each day and studies independently at home.

3.4.2.5. Pedro. Pedro is a Year 7 student attending Arc SRP. He is of White European background and speaks English as an additional language. Pedro has diagnoses of autism and ADHD. He enjoys playing computer games and Warhammer. Pedro follows Arc's model of inclusion, whereby he attends all lessons in the mainstream with adult support. Pedro's transition into secondary school has been challenging, particularly in terms of forming friendships. He uses Arc during break times and occasionally for learning support when emotionally dysregulated, often turning to familiar activities like computer games for regulation.

3.4.2.6. John. John is a Year 8 student and has been attending Arc since Year 7. He has a diagnosis of SLCN and speaks English as an additional language. John enjoys gaming online with friends. John attends most mainstream lessons independently without TA support due to his academic strengths. He has social connections and friendships in both Arc and the mainstream. He spends most break times in mainstream spaces but

occasionally uses Arc during social times and for targeted interventions as specified in his EHCP.

3.4.2.7. Midnight. Midnight is a Year 10 student with a diagnosis of autism and some identified SLCN. Her favourite hobby outside of school is dance. Midnight has attended Arc since Year 7 and receives TA support in most mainstream lessons due to challenges with independent learning. She uses Arc every day during break and lunch times, where she eats lunch and interacts regularly with Arc staff.

3.4.2.8. Tanya. Tanya is a Year 12 student who has attended Arc since Year 7. She has diagnoses of autism and ADHD and speaks English as an additional language. Tanya's favourite hobbies are drawing and Art. Tanya attends all lessons in the mainstream with the support of a TA. She accesses Arc during every break and lunch to eat and regulate, preferring not to interact with other students. Tanya presents with sensory differences and likes to stim and use fidget items to support her self-regulation.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information: Students

School (SRP)	Name	Year Group	Gender	Ethnicity	Diagnosis	Year entered SRP
Rosehill (Willow)	Otto	Year 8	Male	White European	Autism	Year 7
Rosehill (Willow)	Sza	Year 9	Male	Black Caribbean	Autism	Year 7
Rosehill (Willow)	Jeff	Year 11	Male	White British	Autism	Year 7

Rosehill (Willow)	Nadia	Year 13	Female	White British	Autism	Year 10
Northgate (Arc)	Pedro	Year 7	Male	White European	Autism, ADHD	Year 7
Northgate (Arc)	John	Year 8	Male	Pakistani	SLCN	Year 7
Northgate (Arc)	Midnight	Year 10	Female	Black Other	Autism	Year 7
Northgate (Arc)	Tanya	Year 12	Female	Bangladeshi	Autism, ADHD	Year 7

3.4.3 Staff Participants

Eight staff members took part in the study, including four from each school. Of these, six of the staff members were teachers, including four mainstream teachers and two lead teachers of the SRPs, and two were TAs. The mainstream teachers provided perspectives on classroom teaching and the inclusion of students from the SRPs in lessons. The TAs contributed insights into supporting students in both mainstream classrooms and within the SRP itself, where they are more closely involved in delivering personalised interventions and supporting social and emotional regulation. The SRP Head and Coordinator provided operational insights into the implementation and day-to-day management of the SRPs, offering perspectives on practices and support structures in place for the students. All staff had a range of teaching and school experience, which can be seen in Table 3 below, providing varied perspectives on the inclusion and belonging of students within the SRP.

Table 3

Participant Demographic Information: Teaching Staff

School (SRP)	Name	Role	Time worked at school	Number of years worked as Teacher/TA
Rosehill (Willow)	Lyra	Teaching Assistant	2 years	2 years
Rosehill (Willow)	Nick	Willow Coordinator	4 years	4 years
Rosehill (Willow)	Ava	Maths Teacher	7 years	7 years
Rosehill (Willow)	Yanis	English Teacher	3 years	10 years
Northgate (Arc)	Stephanie	Head of Arc	6 years	6 years
Northgate (Arc)	Fatima	Teaching Assistant	3 years	3 years
Northgate (Arc)	Jade	Maths Teacher	6 years	6 years
Northgate (Arc)	Cora	Science Teacher	5 years	5 years

3.5 Procedure and Data Collection

To explore the complexities of inclusion and belonging of students within the SRP, a multitude of data was collected to deepen understanding of the cases and address the RQs. The study consisted of two stages, which are outlined in detail in this section and summarised in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Overview of Procedure and Research Methods

Phase	Method	Participants	Duration	Purpose
Planning Phase	Research Group	3 sixth form students (Willow)	2 sessions	Serve as experts by experience
	Graffiti Wall & Drawing the Ideal School	As above	Session 1	Elicit experiences and perspectives on belonging in SRP and mainstream
	Diamond Ranking & Piloting Tools	As above	Session 2	Elicit further views and pilot tools to refine and adapt materials
Main Study	SRP Observations (3 C's Approach)	Staff and students in Willow and Arc	2 1-hour observations in each SRP	Understand setting cultures and context, and build rapport
	Student Observations (3 C's Approach)	8 SRP students (4 from each school)	2 50-60 minute observations	Explore belonging and inclusion across the SRP and mainstream
	Student Semi-Structured Interviews	As above	30-45 minutes	Explore lived experiences of belonging and inclusion
	Visual Sorting Task	As above	Embedded within interview	Scaffold discussion and support communication
	Adapted Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale	As above	Embedded within interview	Facilitate reflection on SRP vs mainstream
	Staff Semi-Structured Interviews	8 staff (4 per school: SRP & mainstream)	30-45 minutes	Understand views on SRP role in inclusion, providing context to student views

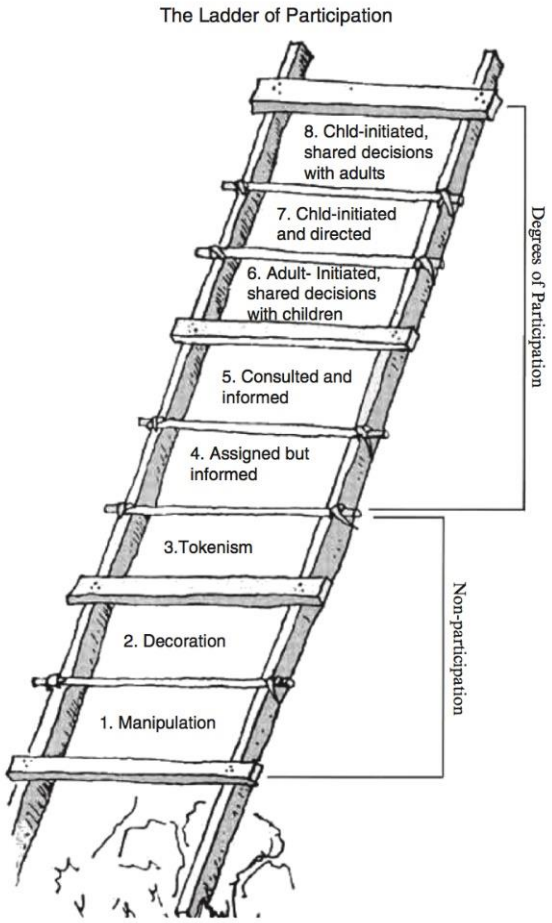
3.5.1 Planning Phase

This study aimed to empower autistic voices and promote inclusive research practices. For research to be fully inclusive of neurodivergent communities, it requires adaptations that enhance the participation of those disempowered in society (Fletcher-Watson et al. 2021). To support this, I have taken steps throughout the research, including considering person-oriented research ethics, recognising participants as experts by experience, and using participatory research method approaches.

3.5.1.1. Participatory Research Method Approaches. Understanding belonging and inclusion from the perspective of neurodivergent students requires meaningful involvement (Fleming et al., 2023; Thomas & Loxley, 2022). Participatory approaches help to address power imbalances between the adult researcher and younger participants. Although this study was not conducted in full partnership with autistic young people, it drew on participatory principles. According to Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation, this study falls at Step 5, 'consulted and informed' (See Figure 4 below).

Figure 4

Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation



For example, I identified the research focus and design and held responsibility for conducting the research, but I incorporated student voice and influence through the Research Group (See Section 3.5.1.3.).

3.5.1.2. Person-Oriented Research Ethic Framework. To further enhance participation in my research, I considered Cascio et al.'s (2020) person-oriented research ethic framework, which recognises the need to advance beyond customary research ethic principles to actively meet the needs of autistic people and support their participation. Key tenets include respecting holistic personhood, individualisation, and consideration of communication and

language. This study followed principles from this framework by employing a Research Group, providing alternative communication methods (visuals), utilising accessible tools, preparing participants in advance of the study, adapting tools and methodology on an individual basis through discussions with staff, offering choices, adjusting time and pace, considering the sensory environment, and building rapport.

3.5.1.3. Research Group. Historically, research involving children and young people with SEN, including autism, has marginalised their voices and favoured adult interpretations (Nind, 2020). In response, participatory research approaches have emerged to challenge these traditions by positioning children and young people as active contributors to research design and knowledge production (Pellicano et al., 2014). This study builds upon this developing field by incorporating accessible, inclusive methods, such as visual and creative techniques, that enable young people with diverse communication needs to meaningfully share their perspectives (Hill et al., 2016). One such method was to position autistic students as experts of their own experiences, as the Research Group.

The Research Group served two purposes:

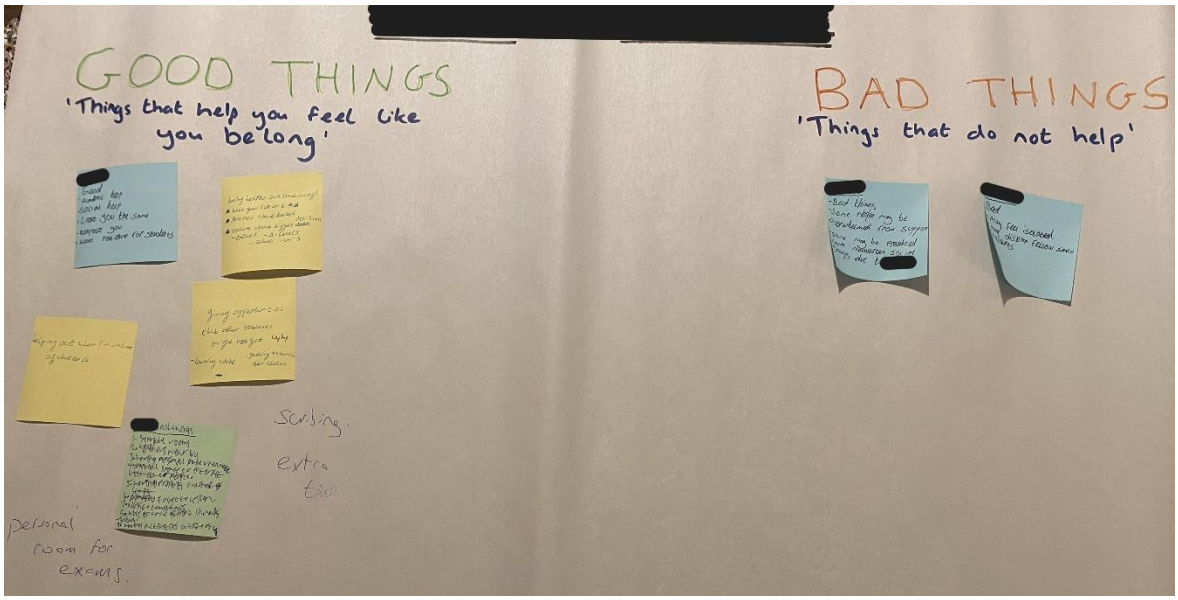
1. To assist in the development and adaptation of research tools and interview questions through their contributions.
2. To pilot and review the tools utilised in the main phase, while identifying any gaps or other considerations.

3.5.1.4. Research Group: Session 1. Two participatory techniques were employed to facilitate discussion: the Graffiti Wall (adapted from Hill et al., 2016) and Drawing the Ideal School (DTIS) (Moran, 2001). The Graffiti Wall

activity, recognised as effective in capturing the voice of young people with SEN (Hill et al., 2016), involved students using Post-it Notes to identify aspects that helped them feel a sense of belonging at school on one side, and those that did not help on the other (See Figure 5). There were two Graffiti Walls, one designed to elicit students' feelings about the SRP and the mainstream.

Figure 5

Research Group's completed Graffiti Wall for the SRP



The DTIS activity (Moran, 2001), drawing on principles from Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955), aims to explore young people's fundamental constructs and perspectives of the world, thereby aligning with the social constructionist and interpretivist position. The Research Group were given the option to draw, write, or share their responses verbally. The DTIS technique has been found effective in research examining the views of autistic young people (Williams & Hanke, 2007).

Visual and creative approaches such as the Graffiti Wall and DTIS are

particularly suitable for participatory research with autistic students, as they reduce verbal demands, provide alternative ways of meaning-making, and enable participants to communicate at their own pace and comfort level (Pellicano et al., 2022). Key themes discussed during the Graffiti Wall and DTIS activities were extracted and directly incorporated into the adaptation of research materials, including interview schedules and the visual sorting task employed in the main study.

3.5.1.5. Research Group: Session 2. The Research Group piloted and reviewed tools for use in the individual interviews. Themes gathered from session one were presented on visual picture cards, through which the Research Group jointly completed the ‘Diamond Ranking’ activity to assess the importance of various aspects of their school experiences (Clark, 2012). This method involved ranking images in order of importance in response to the question “What would make you feel that you belong at school?” (See Figure 6). Diamond Ranking was chosen as a visual, participatory method that encourages students to express their priorities by minimising verbal demands and facilitating structured yet flexible reflection on personal experiences of belonging (Hill et al., 2016). The visual cards identified by the Research Group as important for belonging at school during the Diamond Ranking task served as a supportive tool in the individual interviews.

Figure 6

Research Group's completed Diamond Ranking Activity

The Research Group reviewed tools, including the adapted Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSMS) (discussed in Section 3.5.3.2), the Relationship Circle, and the interview schedule. The Research Group's review highlighted the need for additional prompt questions within the interview schedule, including specific questions about the SRP and the mainstream. They suggested revising the language for clarity in the PSSMS and interview schedule. Furthermore, the Research Group's discussion led to the removal of the Relationship Circle tool, which they felt was too abstract for autistic students. Instead, they believed that students would be better able to

share their experiences about relationships at school through follow-up questions during the visual sorting task. The Research Group also emphasised the importance of including students from various year groups, noting that experiences are likely to differ as students progress through school.

3.5.2 Observations

Observations are fundamental in case study research, enabling the researcher to explore complex phenomena within naturalistic settings and triangulate data from participant interviews (Bryman, 2016; Morgan et al., 2017). Observation approaches vary from formal to informal and from structured to unstructured, with structured and formal observational methods providing clear guidance on what to observe, while more informal methods offer flexibility to capture a fuller picture with minimal preconceptions (Robson & McCartan, 2016). In line with this study's interpretivist position and exploratory nature, unstructured observations were deemed most appropriate, as they enable the capturing of complex, socially constructed experiences without imposing limiting frameworks on what is considered important.

While unstructured observations offer richness and flexibility, they can also pose challenges regarding consistency and analytical clarity. I adopted Fetter and Rubinstein's (2019) '3 Cs Approach' (Context, Content, and Concepts) to focus the observations and enhance rigour. Observation notes are categorised under 'Context', which refers to the setting and circumstances of the observation; 'Content', which includes the events taking place during the observation; and 'Concepts', which encompasses the reflections of the observation, including theoretical insights. Fetter and Rubinstein (2019) developed this framework to tackle the challenges associated with recording

and interpreting unstructured field observations and to improve the quality of observation. In this study, the 3 Cs approach provided a flexible framework for capturing observation data, supported reflexivity, and allowed for flexibility across settings when transitioning between the SRP and mainstream (see Appendix F for observation schedule). Observation data offered further insight into the contexts and complemented the interview data.

Observations focused on the social and environmental dynamics that supported or hindered belonging. This included attention to student-staff interactions, peer relationships, physical positioning in classrooms, group participation, and students' engagement or withdrawal in both settings. I adopted a marginal participant observer role, allowing for minimal disruption while occasionally interacting with participants for clarification. Handwritten notes were recorded in real time, with more detailed write-ups subsequently typed onto a digital template. Field notes were considered primary data and later coded in conjunction with interview transcripts. Observation notes were distinct from the reflexive diary, which emphasised tracking my positionality and emotional responses throughout the research process.

3.5.2.1. Setting Observations. Prior to the main phase of data collection, two unstructured observations were carried out in both Willow and Arc to gain contextual insights into the aims, objectives, and ethos of each SRP. Additionally, these observations helped build rapport with staff and students. While prolonged engagement is common in ethnographic case studies (Reeves et al., 2013), time constraints meant this study instead drew on ethnographic principles through short-term immersion before data collection. Two 1-hour observations were conducted in each SRP, which aided my

familiarity with each setting and allowed me to clarify contextual details and pose questions that enhanced the depth of subsequent data collection.

3.5.2.2. Student Observations. Eight students participated in two observations, one during their mainstream lesson and the other within the SRP (either during an intervention or unstructured time). These observations provided additional context and insight into students' experiences of belonging across both settings, complementing the interview data in accordance with the case study design (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Yin, 1994). The 3 C's Approach was employed to capture qualitative notes. A structured coding system was considered; however, the 3 C's Approach afforded a holistic and flexible understanding of belonging by capturing a rich picture from which to draw meaning (Woods, 2013). Observations were generally conducted prior to interviews to facilitate clarification and deeper discussion.

3.5.3 Interviews with Students

To explore students' lived experiences of belonging, eight students (four from Willow and four from Arc) participated in individual, semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were utilised due to their flexibility in allowing answers to be further explored, given that students' experiences of belonging within SRPs are an under-researched area. This method also supports rapport building and responsiveness to students' communication preferences. Each interview incorporated visual and participatory tools (a visual sorting task and the adapted PSSMS) to foster a rich understanding of experience (Woolner et al., 2010). Drawing on multiple tools permitted the capturing of the complexity of students' perspectives and aided in eliciting pupil voice. In line with ethical

participatory research practices, a visual red ‘stop card’ was placed on the table, and students were informed they could use this to stop the interview at any time. This approach draws on inclusive methods developed to uphold autonomy and agency in research with children and young people with communication differences (Harrington et al., 2014). The student interview schedule can be found in Appendix G.

3.5.3.1 Visual Sorting Task. To support students with SLCN and reduce reliance on verbal expression, a visual sorting task was employed during interviews. Visual methods are widely recommended for enhancing accessibility and participation (Howard et al., 2019), particularly in research involving autistic students, which aligns with this study’s participatory and pupil-voice centred ethos (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019). Murphy (1998) demonstrates how visual frameworks can facilitate the expression of views for individuals with communication difficulties, developing ‘Talking Mats’ that include visual symbols to scaffold conversations visually. Drawing on this, I incorporated a visual sorting task with themes identified by the Research Group during the Diamond Ranking activity to ensure relevance to students’ lived experiences. These included key aspects of school life such as ‘breaktime’, ‘teachers’, ‘interventions’, and ‘TA support’. In interviews, students were asked “What helps you feel like you belong in school?” and sorted the cards into ‘yes’, ‘sometimes’, or ‘no’, using a red, amber, and green traffic light system. This allowed students to externalise their thinking in a concrete format and provided a scaffold for discussion, where I prompted students to elaborate, e.g., “Why are ‘mainstream lessons’ in red?”.

3.5.3.2 Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale. While there is no clear agreement on a definitive tool to measure belonging (Allen et al., 2021), standardised tools can provide an indication of school belonging (Goodenow, 1993). However, the literature emphasises the importance of holistic assessments that align with this study's theoretical frameworks (BPSEM and Integrative Framework). In particular, the need for pupil voice regarding belonging for students with SEN has been highlighted (Midgen et al., 2019). Instead, standardised tools can be employed to triangulate the views shared by young people and offer further insight.

The PSSMS is an 18-item measure that focuses on the social and contextual influences on students' sense of belonging, exhibiting an internal consistency ranging from 0.77 to 0.88 for students aged nine to 14 years (Allen & Kern, 2017; Goodenow, 1993). Caution is often advised regarding the use of standardised measures with neurodivergent populations (Robertson, 2010); however, the PSSMS has previously been employed with students with SEN (Hebron, 2018; McMahon et al., 2008). Consequently, the PSSMS was incorporated as an additional tool to aid students in articulating their views on belonging within an adapted, non-standardised format, ensuring accessibility and an epistemological fit for the study. Students had the option to complete the PSSMS either before or after the interview questions. Instead of scoring responses, the tool served to prompt discussions. For each item, e.g., 'I feel like a part of my school', students selected from four response cards: 'SRP', 'mainstream school', 'both', and 'none'. This approach enabled students to convey how their sense of belonging varied across both settings and facilitated follow-up discussions. The adapted PSSMS is provided in Appendix H.

3.5.4 Interviews with Teaching Staff

Eight members of the teaching staff (two SRP staff and two mainstream teachers from each school) were interviewed to enhance understanding of how the SRP facilitates inclusion within each setting, in accordance with the BPSEM's emphasis on systemic influences on belonging. Semi-structured interviews were selected for their structured framework that aligns with the research questions, while also offering flexibility for follow-up inquiries, thereby facilitating the collection of in-depth, meaningful data (Bryman, 2016). The teaching staff chose their preferred format for the interviews, with five being conducted face-to-face and three taking place via Microsoft Teams. The interview schedules can be found in Appendices I and J.

3.6 Data Analysis

Interview and observation data were analysed using rTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). rTA aligns with the study's interpretivist, social constructionist stance, viewing analysis as a meaning-making process shaped by the interaction between the data and the researcher's subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Unlike other qualitative analysis approaches, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Narrative Analysis, which are better suited to small, homogeneous samples and in-depth interviews of lived experience (Crotty, 1998), rTA is flexible and compatible with various data sources, including interview and observation data from multiple participants.

Although data were collected from two SRPs, rTA was conducted across cases rather than within each school. This decision reflects the study's focus on how students experience belonging rather than on how specific SRPs operate.

A case-by-case presentation of findings would risk obscuring shared patterns in student experiences, as cross-case analysis allows for the identification of recurring experiences, common tensions, and shared meanings, while still recognising school-level variation within themes. This approach is consistent with embedded case study designs, focusing on understanding a broader, shared phenomenon, such as the experience of belonging for autistic students in SRPs (Stake, 2013).

The coding process was primarily inductive, allowing codes to develop from the data without a pre-determined framework. Themes were developed iteratively by identifying patterns of shared meaning and were then structured around a central organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Data from student interviews, teacher interviews, and observations were analysed together to generate joint thematic insights. Initially, thematic development started inductively with student interviews, followed by the coding of staff and observation data to triangulate and enrich interpretation. Observation data provided context to student interviews by capturing behaviours and interactions that complemented or contrasted with students' descriptions. Meanwhile, teacher interviews clarified structural context and relational dynamics that students referenced but could not fully explain, thereby allowing for greater depth and credibility in the findings.

The analysis adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2021b) six-phase process of rTA, enabling a flexible and iterative approach in which the researcher can move between phases as needed (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). This process is detailed in Table 5 below.

Table 5

Six-Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (rTA)

Phase	Description (Braun & Clarke, 2021b)	Application in this Study
1. Familiarisation with the data	Immersing oneself in the data through reading, re-reading, and noting initial ideas.	I transcribed the audio recordings into Microsoft Word documents and typed up observation notes. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, capturing non-verbal forms of communication, such as laughter. I recorded my initial thoughts in my reflexive diary following each interview.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features across the data.	I reviewed the transcripts and labelled data relevant to understanding the students' sense of belonging. I uploaded all transcripts to NVivo 15 and coded them using this software. The codes were data-driven and emerged directly from the interviews and observations, without the use of a predefined framework.
3. Generating themes	Collating codes into potential themes by identifying shared patterns of meaning.	Initial codes were organised into overarching categories and emerging themes that reflected recurring student experiences. Codes derived from staff interviews and observations were then utilised to develop themes.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking themes work in relation to the coded data and the full dataset.	I returned to the data to assess whether the developed themes worked coherently and reflected the underlying meaning I intended to capture. Some themes were merged, split, and redefined.

5.	Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to define the essence of each theme and developing clear names and scope.	Each theme was given a clear focus. This resulted in five themes and 15 subthemes.
6.	Writing the report	Telling a coherent story using data extracts and analytic narrative.	This involved writing up my findings in Chapter 4 using thick description and participant quotes. I constructed a narrative that helped explain how my themes helped answer my research questions, situated within the broader literature and theoretical framework.

An overview of the coding tree can be found in Appendix K, in addition to the detailed framework of codes in Appendix L and examples of coded interview transcripts in Appendix M.

3.7 Evaluation of Research

3.7.1 Trustworthiness of the Research

In qualitative research, trustworthiness offers a method to ensure that the research findings are credible and worthy of attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Yardley (2008) presents a framework for evaluating the quality of qualitative research that acknowledges the influence of the researcher on how knowledge is produced, as qualitative researchers choose research topics, methodologies, and analyses that align with their values. Please see Table 6 below, which details the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness in this study.

Table 6

Trustworthiness of the Research

Criteria	Description	Steps Taken in This Study
Sensitivity to Context	Refers to the researcher demonstrating thorough knowledge of the research area.	• Carried out extensive review and evaluation of existing, research, theories and concepts in literature review, informing direction of research and methodological approaches. • Use of methodologies drawing on participatory approaches to elicit student voice. • Tailored methodologies in collaboration with SRP staff. • Conducted informal observations to familiarise with SRP settings. • Includes contextual detail of each SRP and school setting. • Reflected critically on power dynamics and positionality.
Commitment, Rigour and Credibility	Refers to deep engagement with the research through competent and skilful application of research methods throughout.	• Spent time in each SRP setting to build contextual understanding and rapport. • Worked with staff to adapt interviews to students' communication needs. • Used triangulation (data and methods). • Worked with a student Research Group to shape tools and focus. • Choose inclusive methods appropriate to autistic students.
Transparency and Coherence	Refers to the clarity and strength of the research including the argument, clear methodology, analysis and the congruence of this with theory.	• Maintained a reflexive diary throughout data collection and analysis. • Documented and justified adaptations and decisions across the project. • Used NVivo for systematic coding and theme development.
Impact and Importance	Refers to need for knowledge arising from the research to add value and have practical uses.	• Prioritised autistic students' views on belonging and inclusion. • Generated findings with implications for EPs, schools and policy. • Highlighted often overlooked student voices in SRP contexts.
Transferability	Refers to the extent to which findings may apply to other similar contexts.	• Provided rich, detailed descriptions of each setting and participant group. • Used thick description to support naturalistic generalisation. • Focused on shared experiences rather than generalisable outcomes.

3.7.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the University College London, Institute of Education Ethics Board Committee in May 2024 (See Appendix O). The study followed the guidelines set out by the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics and Code of Ethics and Conduct (Oates et al., 2021). Ethical considerations constituted an ongoing process that required constant reflection and reassessment throughout the study, which I upheld through reflexivity. Given the involvement of neurodivergent students, additional ethical considerations were necessary (Chown et al., 2017). The study adhered to Cascio et al.'s (2020) person-oriented research ethics framework as outlined in Section 3.5.1.2, which informed practical strategies to support the needs of autistic students. Further ethical considerations related to this study can be found in Appendix P.

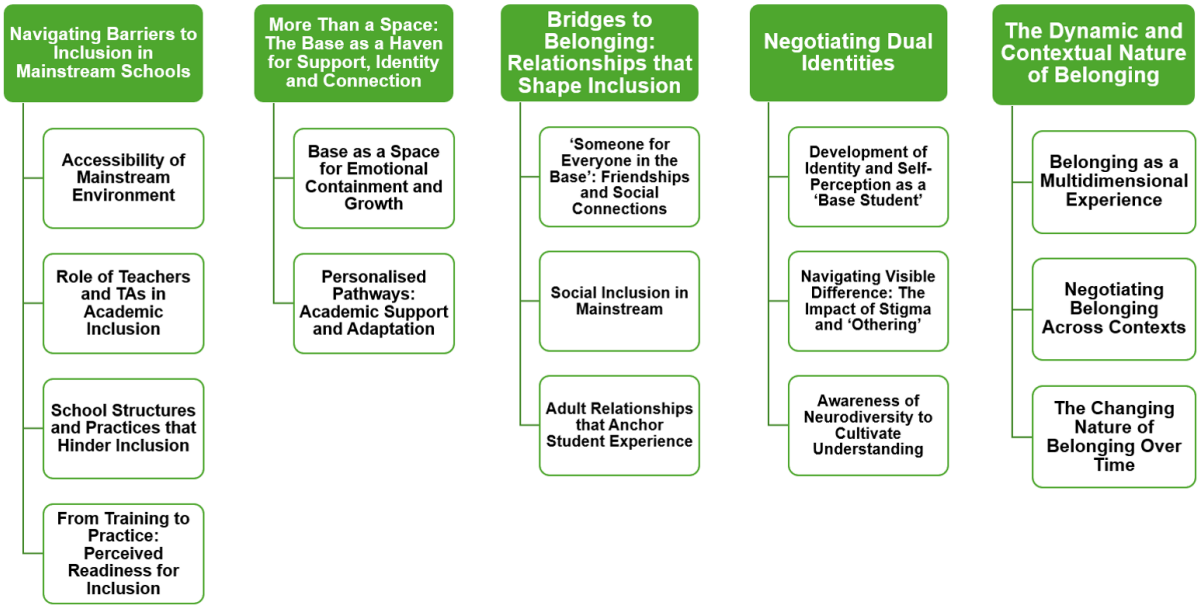
Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of this study, based on the analysis of both student and teacher interviews, in addition to observation data. Using rTA, five themes were generated across the data, including 15 subthemes as seen in Figure 7. Extended theme descriptions can be found in Appendix Q.

Figure 7

Themes and Subthemes Identified within Student and Teacher Interviews and Observation Data



This chapter will explore themes and associated subthemes, including interview quotes to exemplify meaning. The participants selected or were assigned pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. When discussing the students, their names and the SRPs they attend will be presented, for example, *'Nadia,*

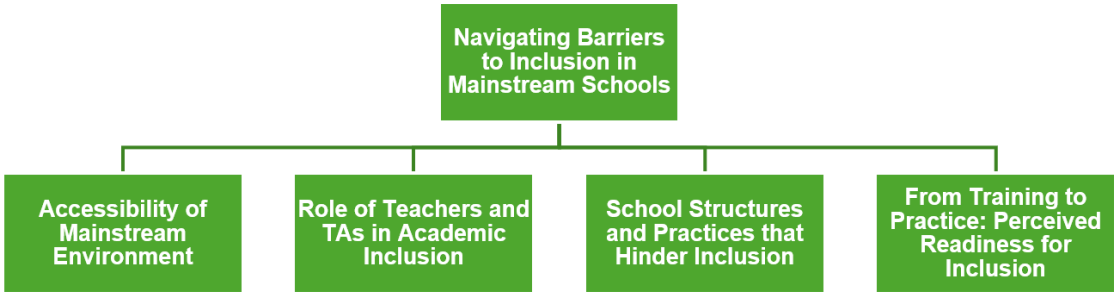
Pupil, Willow'. The names of the teachers, including their role, will also be presented in this way, with SRP staff being indicated by the name of the SRP, e.g., *'Fatima, TA, Arc'* and mainstream teachers being indicated by the name of the school, e.g., *'Cora, Teacher, Northgate'*

4.2 Theme 1: Navigating Barriers to Inclusion in Mainstream Schools

As shown in Figure 8, this theme captures the tensions between inclusion efforts and barriers that impact the students' experiences within the mainstream.

Figure 8

Theme 1 Thematic Map



4.2.1 Accessibility of Mainstream Environment

Common among most students in both schools was difficulty participating in the mainstream due to environmental factors that cause students to feel overwhelmed. The large number of students within mainstream classrooms, social areas, and the corridor appeared to be a common barrier in

both school settings, *“A typical day is mostly crowded” (Tanya, Pupil, Arc)*. The noise within mainstream spaces, particularly from the other students, was reported frequently by students from the SRPs, *“Sometimes it can get quite loud. The students would just start insulting each other and saying swear words. I couldn't understand why” (Tanya, Pupil, Arc).*

In addition to the noise of the other students, the students from the SRPs appeared to have difficulty understanding this behaviour which further impacted on their sense of regulation, *“Some people early in the morning, they’re screaming and happy, but I just wanna relax” (John, Pupil, Arc)*. Students described the negative impact accessing an overwhelming environment had on their wellbeing. Nadia, who now only accesses teaching in Willow, described the challenges she faced when attending mainstream lessons:

> *At first, I was like ‘yeah its fine, I'll go to mainstream, I’m going to be fine, I'm old enough’. I was pretty excited for mainstream as well. I was like, ‘I can be finally normal again’, but then I kind of crashed out, it was a lot for me, like going in extra early in the morning, going home when everyone else is going home, you know, the lessons I had were pretty popular so there was a lot of people for me at least. (Nadia, Pupil, Willow)*

Students used strategies to cope within the mainstream environment. Some students used reasonable adjustments provided by the school, such as a ‘leave lesson early card’, in addition to some students adopting strategies independently. Nadia reported avoiding crowds in the mainstream, *“I always*

came in extra early, so I can avoid that general crowd" (Nadia, Pupil, Willow). The SRPs were chosen as a safe space to provide escape from the large crowds, *"If there's a lot of people, I might wait in Willow" (Sza, Pupil, Willow)*.

Teachers across both schools also recognised the impact of the sensory environment on students from the SRP and the role the SRP plays in providing a regulating space. Stephanie acknowledged, *"Mostly the base is used for times when they need a safer, quieter space" (Stephanie, Head of Arc)*. Some mainstream teachers were concerned that this avoidance of the mainstream environment was counterproductive as although it provided a quiet space when students were dysregulated, it sometimes became a cycle whereby students started to avoid other aspects of the mainstream, *"One of them, for example, uses it [SRP] as avoidance from the exams and me and Stephanie [Head of Arc], are working to get that student to use it when they actually need it, not as an avoidance strategy" (Jade, Teacher, Northgate).* Jade's concerns were echoed by another mainstream teacher in Northgate, Cora, who reflected on the frequent use of the SRP and the impact on the students' social development:

> *You could argue it's inclusion or exclusion. I think the Arc area is great. However, a lot of students go and choose to spend their time there and they're staying very much within their groups with people that have similar social skills to themselves so they're not learning from their peers about social skills. (Cora, Teacher, Northgate).*

The students' social inclusion will be explored in Theme 3 Section 4.4.2.

4.2.2 Role of Teachers and TAs in Academic Inclusion

A key element of students receiving tailored academic support is through the support of TAs from the SRP in mainstream lessons. This support was recognised by the students across both schools, many of whom highly valued the support they received, *"I really like the support I get, I really appreciate it" (Midnight, Pupil, Arc)*. Otto spoke about how the teachers and TAs from Willow helped with his learning as they understood his individual needs, *"I know that there are adults out there [Willow staff] who understand my needs and know what I need for proper learning" (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*. Sza shared that the TA was able to support him to access the learning when he has difficulty understanding in mainstream lessons, *"They would help me with the stuff I don't understand. Say the teacher explained something and I wouldn't understand it properly then my TA would explain it in a whole other way to help me fully understand" (Sza, Pupil, Willow).* Otto also discussed that the learning support from the SRP staff, supported his confidence in learning alongside mainstream peers:

> *The help I get with the staff in the base makes me feel a little more confident in my learning and that I belong more because it will help me to learn at the same pace as the other students. (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*

Although some students highlighted the strengths of TA support in mainstream lessons, there appeared to be a balancing act for TAs when providing support. John spoke about the timing of TA support, and supporting 'when' he needs help, *"They actually know when I need help somehow" (John, Pupil, Arc)*. John expanded on the type of support he valued from TAs, *"They support you, [they] don't fully help you but they slowly support you" (John,*

Pupil, Arc). Tanya highlighted that the TA support can sometimes be overwhelming:

> *It can get a bit annoying. Like when I'm wanting to take a break for a bit, or maybe I'd get distracted. It just gets a bit too much when they complain about it or just tell me that I'm getting distracted. (Tanya, Pupil, Arc)*

Fatima, a TA in Arc, shared that this perspective was common among students from Arc, *"We've got quite a few students that are quite resistant for help" (Fatima, TA, Arc)*. Otto shed light on the dilemma of having TA support in lessons, which is one of concern of mainstream peers' perceptions*, "It's like what others might be thinking about me in lessons for needing a TA. But also having someone who understands what I need, like the point I made with the help with learning" (Otto, Pupil, Willow).* Stephanie acknowledged students' awareness of stigma can prevent students from accessing support, *"I think the awareness of the stigma, some students saying that I don't want somebody to sit next to me" (Stephanie, Head of Arc)*. Further exploration of the impact of stigma will be discussed in Section 4.5.2 under Theme 4.

In response, teachers have highlighted movement toward alternative models focused on fostering independence. In Northgate, Stephanie shared, *"We're trying to go away from the model of sitting next to the students that have an EHCP. Because we want them to be independent to start with" (Stephanie, Head of Arc).* Mainstream teachers also highlight that some students from the SRP can become reliant on TA support which can be a further barrier to academic inclusion, *"Some students put their hand up asking for help before*

they've even tried the question, because they think TAs are there to help them straight away" (Jade, Teacher, Northgate).

The role of mainstream teachers in including students from the SRP was less clear. Mainstream teachers discussed the importance of communication with staff from the SRP, *"I communicate with Stephanie [Head of Arc]. I tend to stay in touch with keyworkers" (Cora, Teacher, Northgate)*. Staff from the SRP played a role in supporting mainstream teachers' understanding of students, *"…sharing practice with teachers in classroom to improve the support that our students are getting" (Stephanie, Head of Arc)*. However, this collaboration was ad hoc across both school settings, with responsibility falling on individual teachers to seek information to support students. Both schools also used 'pupil passports' to communicate students' specific learning needs and provision to teachers. However, this again fell to individual teachers to implement, which can vary amongst teachers:

> *I don't think they're included enough sometimes, because I feel like some teachers aren't educated as much or they don't know the student as well. Especially when they've moved classes or it might be new teachers starting so they don't really know the students, which can be quite a pain sometimes because they might be doing behaviour that's normal for them but to that teacher it's behaviour they shouldn't be doing in the class, then they get in trouble for it. (Fatima, TA, Arc)*

4.2.3 School Structures and Practices that Hinder Inclusion

Teachers frequently outlined systemic challenges that made it difficult to include students from the SRP. Some of the teaching staff reported a general

dissatisfaction with inclusion practices in the schools. Lyra, a TA in Willow, compared school operations to those of a business rather than focusing on students' individual needs:

> *At the end of the day, school is a business, you take kids in for a certain amount of money from the government. And as long as you tick these boxes and everything is done in terms of EHCPs and Annual Reviews you're fine and the funding keeps coming. And I don't like that about it. (Lyra, LSA, Willow)*

4.2.3.1. Pressures. Similar themes were echoed in Northgate School by Cora, who described pressure on teachers and students to focus on academic subjects, which is not always to the advantage of students from the SRP:

> *There's a pressure […] of pushing students to go for subjects that are considered more academic. And I think we are letting a lot of our students down and it makes me think, would these students be better off at another school? Like a college that's doing more vocational stuff. And every time my tutor group get a report and all they've got are grade ones and they just feel disheartened because they know it's not going to get them anywhere. (Cora, Teacher, Northgate)*

Such pressures were recounted by John, in Year 8, when reflecting on his transition to Northgate in Year 7, *"The thing is the expectation...Realistically is like five times higher" (John, Pupil, Arc)*. Nadia also shared a similar experience in a previous mainstream secondary school which was found to be overwhelming, *"There was just a lot of pressure from day one to do this amount of homework, do this, this and this. It was just so much" (Nadia, Pupil, Willow)*.

4.2.3.2. Impact of Ability Grouping. In both school settings, many students from the SRP were taught in low-attainment groups in the mainstream. Cora questioned whether the model of placing students in lower sets was truly inclusive, *“I think we are including them in some ways, like they're here. They're not being removed from the classrooms. They're also at the same time being excluded by being put in those separate groupings” (Cora, Teacher, Northgate).* Additionally, some teachers questioned whether this approach benefited the learning of the students, as teachers tended to have lower expectations for this group. Fatima reflected that students from Arc often do not engage with learning in their mainstream lessons:

> *I might say to the teacher, ‘this student don't want to do any more work’ and they might try and have a word with them to see if they can get them to do the work. If not some of the teachers are happy to just let them sit there and do nothing as long as they're not disturbing the lesson. (Fatima, TA, Arc)*

The impact of ability groupings and low expectations appeared to hinder not just students’ academic inclusion but their sense of self. Jade reflected on hearing negative self-talk from students from Arc, *“It's very hard if […] you've heard for over 10 years of your life that you're bad at maths, you’re going to believe it” (Jade, Teacher, Northgate).* Midnight recounted her experiences of feeling her skills and abilities were ‘underestimated’ within the mainstream, *“A lot of the students and other people in mainstream school, they kind of underestimate me…They think sometimes I may not be as good as everyone else or generally they may be more critical” (Midnight, Pupil, Arc).* During my observation of Otto in a mainstream lesson for a low-ability grouping, I

observed that he appeared ‘bored’ during the lesson and noted the lack of high expectations for students from the SRP in the lesson.

4.2.3.3. School Policies and Systemic Factors. The students regularly reported dissatisfaction with behaviour policies and practices. Pedro highlighted that he did not understand why he was receiving sanctions, *“I got annoyed every time I got shouted, I got into trouble every time for no reason” (Pedro, Pupil, Arc).* Other students recalled similar themes of dissatisfaction with teachers' approach to behaviour, *“This one teacher puts you in trouble for no reason. Like almost nothing and I'm getting shouted at” (John, Pupil, Arc).*

According to teachers, resource constraints were the largest structural and systemic barrier to including students from the SRP. It appeared that staff were aware of practices and strategies to apply in their lessons, yet time and resource constraints prevented teachers from being able to implement the support:

> *The truth of it is, there's plenty of things we can do, it’s sometimes hard to find the time to actually put that differentiation, scaffolding into place, even having the organisation to print out the slides, printers broken half the time anyway. (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*

Additionally, not having time was a commonly reported barrier to SRP and mainstream collaboration in both schools, *“We're all very busy, so sometimes there's no time to pop into Arc and have a 10-minute conversation about a student” (Jade, Teacher, Northgate)*.

4.2.4 From Training to Practice: Perceived Readiness for Inclusion

Staff across both school settings reported a lack of staff training on supporting students from SRP or that the training offered tended to be 'generic', *"We've had some SEN training and very generic and a bit repetitive where it's like 'use a light blue screen', 'use this font'…" (Cora, Teacher, Northgate)*. Yanis, a teacher in Rosehill, discussed feeling unprepared for small group teaching in the SRP:

> *I would have liked more pedagogical strategies for dealing with one-to-one or small group lessons because it's a very different dynamic from teaching the whole class. A lot of the pedagogy, teacher training and CPD is focused on a teacher delivering to a class of 28, 30, 32 pupils. There's not much training that's dedicated on how to approach group exercises and strategies that could be more useful in a one-to-one or small group…Sometimes it does feel like you're experimenting, and it's by trial and error. (Yanis, Teacher, Rosehill)*

Yanis reported feeling a lack of confidence in supporting the students, *"Sometimes I feel like I'm not making any progress like is it even worth it and am I wasting my time here? And would they be better off with someone else? Someone more experienced?" (Yanis, Teacher, Rosehill).* Despite this, Willow staff felt that mainstream teachers frequently teaching small groups within Willow was a strength that supported their inclusive practice and teaching neurodivergent learners, which was recognised by most mainstream teachers as a gap in their training and skill set:

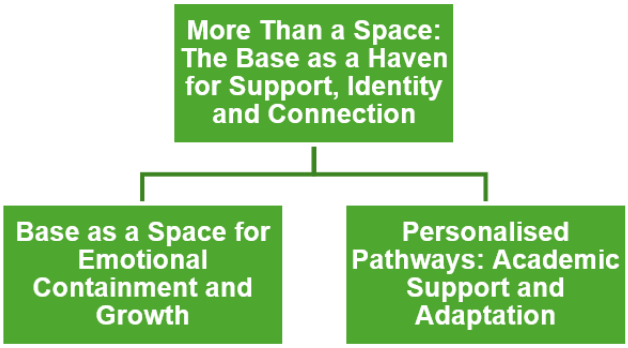
The fact that they [mainstream teachers] come down here and spend time in small group settings with our students gives them a larger toolkit when they're back in mainstream, having to deal with those same issues. It's little things where you suddenly start understanding that oh, just because their heads on the desk doesn't mean they're not listening. Or, yes, he's standing up right now and walking around, but I can trust him to do that quietly at the back of the classroom because I know he's going to sit back down once it's time to do the worksheet, little details like that, I think do make quite a big difference for our students. (Nick, Willow Coordinator).

4.3 Theme 2: More Than a Space: The Base as a Haven for Support, Identity and Connection

This theme, as illustrated in Figure 9, emphasises the versatility of SRPs and their role beyond a separate space for students.

Figure 9

Theme 2 Thematic Map



4.3.1 Base as a Space for Emotional Containment and Growth

Students discussed accessing the SRP to escape from the mainstream environment, *“It's smaller and quieter here compared to mainstream” (Tanya, Pupil, Arc)*. Similarly, many students in both schools chose to spend their break times in the SRP to avoid the number of students in mainstream, “*There can be quite a lot of children in the playground, which is why I prefer to stay in the base” (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*. The SRP appeared to give students a chance to pause and recharge, *“I just come here to eat and just relax for a bit.” (Tanya, Pupil, Arc)*. Additionally, many students spoke about feeling safe and more relaxed when in the SRP, *“It's more of yourself in Arc… ‘Cause I wouldn't say this stuff to probably anyone except maybe my parents but being here just makes me feel a little more safe” (John, Pupil, Arc).*

The notion of the SRP as a safe space was unanimously described by all staff members in both schools. Staff identified that the students needed the SRP to cope with the mainstream environment, *“I think it gives them confidence that they are not getting lost in a big school, it can be quite overwhelming” (Stephanie, Head of Arc).* Stephanie highlighted that the SRP was a ‘go-to’ place for students, *“It is their safe space. Students just coming to have a rant in the base or they just ask for a break. They see it as we're the first point of contact to address any concerns that might have” (Stephanie, Head of Arc).*

Linked to the idea of the SRP as a safe space, staff highlighted that the primary role of the SRP was for emotional support and containment, *“I think for the majority of them is more emotional support rather than the learning one” (Stephanie, Head of Arc).* The idea of the SRP as offering support beyond

academic and learning support was demonstrated by students who showed strengths in their academic ability but frequently accessed the SRP. Nick described how Otto, who is a highly independent student, chooses to remain actively engaged with the SRP:

> *He's really bright, really academically able, top sets in maths and English, doesn't get any support in class, and yet of the students who are in that mould, he's the only one who still regularly uses Willow at lunchtime and break time and will come here before school and will openly and happily be part of Willow. Whilst he has the full liberty to be fully independent from us. (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*

Students also recognised the value of the SRP in providing a space for emotional regulation. The SRP was used to help students to regulate when they became overwhelmed within the mainstream, *“When I'm getting upset in the lessons I can do even work in there [Arc]” (Pedro, Pupil, Arc)*. Staff recognised the importance of this space for students to regulate their emotions, which can be challenging within the mainstream:

> *They have a safe place in Arc because even the more difficult ones, when you can't get them to go anywhere, they will choose to go there themselves, like [student] when he used to really blow up, he would choose to go there. (Cora, Teacher, Northgate)*

Beyond the physical space of the SRP providing a calming, regulating environment, staff within the SRP were identified as being central to offering a containing space across both SRPs. Midnight highlighted, *“They have different teachers that you can go to if you need any support” (Midnight, Pupil, Arc).* In

Willow, Sza reported that the emotional support they received from SRP staff was central to their development, "*I feel like I wouldn't turn out how I turned out now and I wouldn't like that" (Sza, Pupil, Willow).* SRP staff also acknowledged their key role in supporting the wellbeing of the students in the SRP, *"I can see that I'm a safe space for so many of these kids" (Lyra, LSA, Willow)*. This was attributed to the familiarity and predictability of the SRP, including the staff within the SRP, *"I think they see me like a known person, that I'm here consistently every day and they can talk. I want them to feel that whatever the result I can always help them" (Stephanie, Head of Arc).*

4.3.2 Personalised Pathways: Academic Support and Adaptation

Each school setting differed slightly in its approach to academic support. At Northgate, the students do not access direct teaching or small group teaching in Arc. Instead, all lessons and teaching are accessed within the mainstream, supported mainly by a TA from Arc, while Arc is used for specific, targeted interventions as specified by their EHCP. Similarly, in Rosehill, students access learning in mainstream with the TA support, in addition to interventions tailored to their specific social and emotional needs. However, students attending Willow also receive small group teaching in Willow by mainstream teachers. This operates on a flexible approach in response to the students specific learning needs with some Willow students accessing *"Between a third to half of their lessons in Willow" (Nick, Willow Coordinator)* and some Willow students who, *"Don't go to mainstream, they just stay in the base" (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*.

Irrespective of the differing approaches between the two SRPs, the students in both settings appeared to value the learning support and

interventions they received within the SRP, *“It's because they have a place where I can stay and I can get support while also having a good amount of students here” (Midnight, Pupil, Arc).* Some students felt that it was easier to learn in the SRP. Otto recounted, *“In Willow less things feel a lot less crowded meaning I can focus more easily and potentially get more work done.” (Otto, Pupil, Willow).* Other students found the academic interventions supported their learning and made it easier to access the mainstream environment, “*I love the interventions, they definitely help me a lot…I can get better at my class, say it was a math intervention, they'll teach me about what I'm going to learn in there” (Sza, Pupil, Willow).*

A key feature of the academic support for students within the SRP was access to reasonable adjustments to meet specific learning needs. Tanya shared accessing a laptop in lessons to support her writing, *“When I start to realise that I was much more slower than the others at writing” (Tanya, Pupil, Arc)*. Such adjustments also supported students to access lessons within the mainstream environment, *“They let us leave 5 minutes early to get out before the crowd” (Sza, Pupil, Willow)*. Cora highlighted the importance of tailoring teaching for the students individual learning needs, *“It's almost like you're tailoring your teaching to suit every individual in the classroom, which is hard, but when there's twelve of them, it can be done” (Cora, Teacher, Northgate).* Additionally, there was an emphasis on staff being aware of each student’s individual needs and tailoring their expectations to match each learner. Some staff demonstrated a deep understanding of each student’s learning profile, history, and emotional boundaries. This kind of relational knowledge appeared

to play a key role in creating learning environments where students felt recognised and supported:

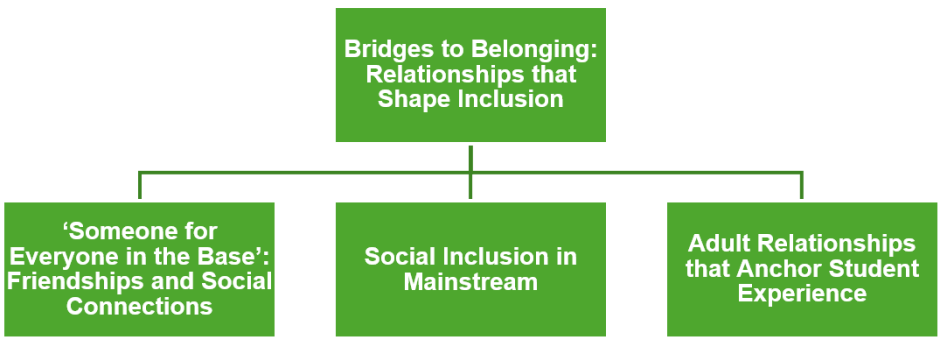
> *I know what each child should be doing and I know where they are at, I know where their limits are. So for each child, I know I have a different expectation. For example, there's one girl I know she's gonna answer every question, but I know all of them are going to be wrong, but then I'm going to go over and I'm going to pick two questions and ask her to redo them, the two that I know are the most important ones. I'm going to give her some prompts for those ones. (Cora, Teacher, Northgate)*

4.4 Theme 3: Bridges to Belonging: Relationships that Shape Inclusion

This theme, as illustrated in Figure 10, emphasises the role of relationships in facilitating and hindering the belonging of students attending the SRP.

Figure 10

Theme 3 Thematic Map



4.4.1 'Someone for Everyone in the Base': Friendships and Social Connections

Across both school settings students from the SRP interacted with and formed close relationships with other students from the SRP, *"There's not many of the Arc students that have outside friends from Arc" (Fatima, TA)*. One of the reasons highlighted for friendships developing amongst students from the SRP related to similarities between the students, *"They're all just friends with each other because they all have similar, unique interests. So like World of Warcraft, things that not everybody is interested in, but they have a real passion for" (Cora, Teacher, Northgate).*

Some of the students highlighted that they felt they could relate to and connect with students from the SRP. Otto discussed feeling more comfortable with the students in Willow, *"It tends to be more familiar with them as we are all in the same base and we can understand each other a lot better" (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*. This comfortability was linked to having similar needs, *"The students in Willow have similar educational needs meaning it feels normal for me to be with them" (Otto, Pupil, Willow).* Sza echoed this and added that being part of Willow was a good starting point to develop friendships:

> *I know that they have that condition 'cause they're in Willow and that's a really good topic to make friends or you might have the same interests, you might have very opposite interests, but you might still get along. It's a good thing to have. (Sza, Pupil, Willow)*

The SRP as a space for students to develop friendships was acknowledged by both students and staff, *"I think Arc is a safe space where*

they can just be with their friends, there's a friend group in my tutor group and they're all Arc students" (Jade, Teacher, Northgate). Sza shared that Willow was a central aspect to his current friendship group, "*If I wasn't in Willow, I don't think I would have this bunch of friends that I have now" (Sza, Pupil, Willow).* Jade recognised that the SRP space was unique in providing students more frequent opportunities to interact with one another, "*Because the Arc kids have their base and they have more time with each other, they have friends within Arc" (Jade, Teacher, Northgate).* Similarly in Willow, Nick highlighted that having this space allowed students to find a friend more easily, particularly in comparison to mainstream environments such as primary school, where this may have been more challenging:

> *The nature of autism is to struggle socially, and primary school would have been a bit of an isolating experience, and they get to come here and because we've got enough kids they can all find a friend, right? There's someone for everyone in Willow. (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*

Additionally, Nick reflected that Willow had a possible advantage over other SRPs as they had over 45 students, meaning *"We're above that critical mass where they can start socialising within the base" (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*. During my break time observations of both SRPs, I noted more reciprocal interactions occurring between students in Willow, while students in Arc (with 28 students) tended to engage in more solitary activities, such as reading or playing on the computer.

As most students in the SRPs experienced difficulties in social communication and interaction skills, the SRP served as a space for learning about social interactions and relationships:

> *As an ASD base, if our primary concern is to help them through social interactions and what their primary need is, is a social need most of the time, it is important that they have more opportunities to socialise than everyone else not less. (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*

Nick discussed the benefits of the SRP as a social space as adults were present to support on an impromptu basis to offer support and teaching of social skills:

> *The fact that our students are friends with each other within the base means that we can catch them up on so many situations that may lead to some kind of vulnerability or problem. It's not happening in the playground where you're looking from 20 metres away. It's happening on the chair next to you. (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*

Additionally, it is not just adults that the students can learn these skills from. Nick found that students could learn about relationships and social skills from other students in the SRP, *"It builds more of a natural pathway for Willow students in Year 7 who look up at the friendships of our older students" (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*. Stephanie discussed that occasionally the support is more explicit, for example matching students from the SRP with potential friends, "*We try match if we know that this student would be a nice friend for the other one, we might match them with the interventions we are running" (Stephanie, Head of Arc).*

Nick outlined that some of the friendships the students have made within the SRP have developed to students socialising outside of school, *“When I found out that they had a group chat amongst themselves, I was over the moon” (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*. Such friendships have been highly regarded by parents of the students in the SRP, *“We've mums come for an Annual Review, off the cuff they'll mention ‘Oh, and by the way my son had a birthday party for the first time in his life’” (Nick, Willow Coordinator).*

4.4.2 Social Inclusion in Mainstream

Across both school settings, students’ social experiences and interactions within the mainstream differed. Some students spoke about spending time with students from the mainstream, “*I spend quite some time with them [friends in mainstream]” (Sza, Pupil, Willow)*, while Jeff shared that, *“Most of my friends are from mainstream” (Jeff, Pupil, Willow)*. Although some of the students from the SRP reported that they were not friends with students from the mainstream, they still interacted with them, *“Some of the mainstream students who I can talk with, it actually feels pretty good talking with them” (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*.

Generally, the students reported limited interactions with mainstream students, *“But to be honest, I barely ever actually speak with anyone off my table” (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*. The students from the SRP generally had negative perceptions of mainstream students, Sza shared, *“Seeing mainstream students now is just wild. I would never want to be a mainstream student like that” (Sza, Pupil, Willow)*. Some students described disliking the behaviour of some mainstream students, *“They can be rude in mainstream” (Midnight, Pupil, Arc)*, and finding them *“Really annoying” (Tanya, Pupil, Arc)*.

The students from the SRP appeared to have difficulty understanding some of the behaviours of mainstream students which lead to frustration, as Pedro discussed, “A *lot of them are really rude. I don't know why they being so rude” (Pedro, Pupil, Arc).* Midnight described finding it difficult to tolerate the behaviour of mainstream students, *“They can be sometimes loud, or just a bit too silly” (Midnight, Pupil, Arc).* Otto shared that socialising with mainstream students could be challenging:

> *There are a lot of people to talk to and they're all very different. And that is a good thing that we’re all unique but…Due to that, I may have difficulty talking to one person and move on talking to another. (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*

Despite the challenges in students from the SRP’s interactions with mainstream students, some of the students identified that there were some positives. Otto discussed that accessing learning alongside mainstream students supported his social understanding, *“Helping me to understand mainstream students who aren't in a base” (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*. Sza recognised that socialising in the mainstream would support other aspects of his life:

> *I realised that I need to come out of my shell, push myself to be used to situations like this, like being in large crowds, stuff that I won't really do… Because I can't always be somewhere with not a lot of people. I’m getting to that age now where I need to actually think about being in those situations. (Sza, Pupil, Willow)*

Similarly, across both school settings, the teachers spoke about the benefits of students from the SRP being socially included and interacting with mainstream students. Stephanie outlined how the students' access to social situations within the mainstream prepares the students for life after education:

> *They're experiencing how it's going to be when school finishes. You know, that they will have to find strategies to communicate something, to ask for something, to know where to go if something goes wrong. So it's more to become as independent as possible. (Stephanie, Head of Arc)*

Cora voiced concern that if students from the SRP did not socialise with mainstream students, this could negatively impact their social development:

> *Some of my Year 11s, their social skills have barely improved since they were in Year 7 and Year 8. Some of them because they just haven't exposed themselves to it, they've just stayed doing what they're doing, just sort of stayed at that level. (Cora, Teacher, Northgate)*

Similarly, in Rosehill, Yanis highlighted that the students from Willow continuing to socialise with one another acted as a barrier, further separating students from their mainstream peers:

> *They become very safe in their friendship groups in Willow, so it is almost then isolating themselves from the wider school… They have just got comfortable, and they're not necessarily pushed to go out and engage. (Yanis, Teacher, Rosehill)*

Yet there remain other barriers to students' social inclusion with mainstream peers. Some of the students did not show a particular interest in socialising and preferred to spend time on their own, *"I just like to be quiet and*

chill" (Midnight, Pupil, Arc). Sza discussed feeling pressure to conform to social norms and socialise, *"I don't like socialising with other people. I hate that. But I have to do it" (Sza, Pupil, Willow)*. Some of the staff recognised this and respected that students had unique social preferences, *"We have students that don't want to make friends and that's OK, they just want to be there and observe" (Stephanie, Head of Arc).*

Other difficulties that were outlined by the students in both SRPs were negative interactions with mainstream peers. Some of the students shared that they perceived they were disliked by mainstream students, *"Some of them don't really like me. Like it's OK, I can just ignore them" (Midnight, Pupil, Arc)*. Additionally, students and staff frequently discussed that some mainstream students held negative beliefs and perceptions about students from the SRP, resulting in students from the SRP experiencing bullying:

> *It's cliche to say this, but kids can be cruel. And while most of them [mainstream students] generally are fine, like they don't make fun of tics or speech impediments. It only takes one or two to really upset that confidence to undo weeks and months of hard work. And I don't think that risk necessarily outweighs the benefit of trying to keep them more included, but it can certainly be a challenge. (Yanis, Teacher, Rosehill)*

This quote highlights the potential fragility of students' belonging as their acceptance is contingent on peer perceptions, which can exclude students for presenting with a 'difference'. Students' experiences of social stigma and bullying will be further explored under Theme 4.

4.4.3 Adult Relationships that Anchor Student Experience

A strong and trusting relationship with staff was a central factor in students' experiences in both schools. Many students identified staff from the SRP, particularly keyworkers, as their primary source of support, *“Mainly the teachers in Willow, they help me the most. Like my keyworker and mainly just any of the TAs in Willow” (Sza, Pupil, Willow)*. Midnight highlighted the kindness and care of Arc staff, stating, *“Everyone in Arc is generally very kind and very supportive, and they care about each other” (Midnight, Pupil, Arc)*. Staff members also recognised their role in fostering these relationships, particularly in ‘knowing the students’. Lyra described how she has remained a keyworker to a student with a complex home life, explaining that *“They thought I had a good pastoral impact on her. And so, they kept me [as keyworker]” (Lyra, LSA, Willow)*. Otto echoed that he felt staff from Willow know students well, *“They are caring about the Willow students and they know what’s needed” (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*. Students and staff from both SRPs also discussed engaging in positive ‘informal’ social interactions. Sza shared how these relationships were built through everyday interactions, *“We just talk about stuff” (Sza, Pupil, Willow)*. Similarly, in Arc, Fatima noted that break time conversations helped foster a sense of approachability that enhanced relationships with students, *“At break times, I'll come out, we'll have a little chitchat or ask them how their weekends have been” (Fatima, TA, Arc)*.

A key feature of these relationships was the role staff from the SRP played in conflict resolution and emotional regulation. Midnight observed that staff in Arc provided more direct support when a difficulty arose, *“Because in mainstream some things might go unnoticed, and I feel like Arc can help get*

stuff acknowledged and having all these different teachers who you can talk to really helps" (Midnight, Pupil, Arc). Stephanie reinforced this idea, stating that students viewed her as, *"the mediator, the person they're going to come and rant to, to come up with a solution together" (Stephanie, Head of Arc)*.

While students generally described strong, positive relationships with SRP staff, experiences with mainstream teachers were more variable. Some students, like Midnight, reflected positively on their interactions, *"More of the teachers that I have are being very fair and very kind. Generally, I think they're very good" (Midnight, Pupil, Arc*). Tanya also recalled positive anecdotes of interactions with her teachers, *"Miss was so fun to talk to, I would tell her all the weirdest things that I experienced, and the other girls would also tell" (Tanya, Pupil, Arc)*. However, others encountered challenges in feeling understood or supported. Pedro identified mainstream teachers' shouting as a key barrier, *"The only negative is Mr X, which is one of the worst teachers because he is literally shouting at everybody" (Pedro, Pupil, Arc)*. Similarly, John described a strained relationship with a particular teacher, which led to a dislike of that subject*, "Maths, cause the teacher, I find irritating" (John, Pupil, Arc)*. These accounts highlight how teacher-student dynamics in mainstream settings could impact students' engagement and sense of belonging.

Mainstream teachers in both schools also acknowledged the challenges in building relationships with students from the SRP. Yanis described the patience required, explaining, *"The most challenging thing is waiting for that breakthrough and being patient because it's very easy to get frustrated when you're not making the same progress" (Yanis, Teacher, Rosehill).* Reflecting on a student who initially avoided interaction, Yanis expanded on how maintaining

a consistent approach led to a bond developing, *“He started breaking out and he'd make little sly jokes... that consistency and approach helped him become a little more confident” (Yanis, Teacher, Rosehill*). Both mainstream and SRP staff identified time and consistency as key factors in building positive relationships. However, the unique role of SRP staff enabled them to form even stronger connections with students:

> *We have this luxury to build a relationship with those students, to have a better understanding, which cannot be described with a strategy or it's the insight that you get that I know they’re very upset now in this period and know the family has shared this so we need to be a bit more aware about that and we have the flexibility to do that. (Stephanie, Head of Arc)*

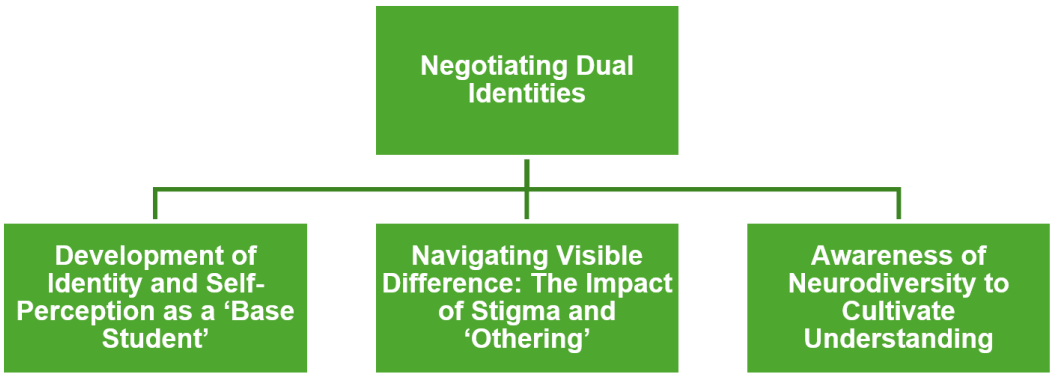
Allowing time was considered important for students to become familiar with teachers, *“Some of them take a long time to get used to someone. Some of them got used to me very quickly and some of them still are a little bit reserved” (Jade, Teacher, Northgate).* Although close relationships with staff from the SRP were a source of support, some concerns emerged about students becoming overly reliant and attached to TAs. Cora noted, *“The kids are becoming too reliant on certain TAs. And that's where boundaries get a bit blurred” (Cora, Teacher, Northgate)*. Similarly, Lyra described how students viewed her as ‘family’, which could blur professional boundaries*, “They all say ‘Oh, you're like my big sister’ or ‘you’re like my Auntie Lyra.’ [Lyra laughs] And I'm like, no, I’m Miss Lyra to you guys” (Lyra, LSA, Willow)*.

4.5 Theme 4: Negotiating Dual Identities

This theme, as shown in Figure 11, captures how students navigate the two educational environments, the SRP and the mainstream, negotiating their identities between these distinct settings.

Figure 11

Theme 4 Thematic Map



4.5.1 Development of Identity and Self-Perception as a 'Base Student'

For most students, being a part of the SRP was something to be proud of. The SRP provided a sense of security and community, allowing students to feel accepted. Midnight described her experience in Arc as *"amazing"* stating that being part of Arc is, *"really something special" (Midnight, Pupil)*. Similarly, Sza expressed a strong connection to Willow, *"I'm definitely proud of being a part of Willow. I wouldn't have it any other way" (Sza, Pupil,)*. For some students, being part of the SRP was associated with seeing differences as a positive aspect of their identity. Midnight noted appreciating the diversity within the wider school *"I think it's cool that there's a lot of students that speak*

multiple languages. I think it's interesting" (Midnight, Pupil, Arc). Otto echoed this affirming, *"And that is a good thing that we're all unique" (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*.

Despite the positive associations for some students, others actively distanced themselves from the SRP label, particularly when in mainstream settings driven by a desire to avoid being perceived as different. Nick reflected that for some students, he will avoid making their association with Willow visible:

> *Those students who are more academic, tend to be more hesitant of being part of Willow, they tend to not like the label. Around school I'm known as the 'Willow guy.' And so for one of those students who doesn't necessarily like the label I know to not knock on the classroom door for them. (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*

Stephanie also noted that the visibility of support can create discomfort, *"A lot of students find it difficult that other students will judge them... so that can be a challenge because immediately there is more resistance and they will say, 'No, I don't want to go anymore'" (Stephanie, Head of Arc)*. This resistance suggests that the label of the SRP carries connotations that some students perceive as limiting or stigmatising, further explored in Section 4.5.2. For some students, this concern about labels extends to their broader self-perception, with Otto sharing, *"I don't tell others about my special educational needs" (Otto, Pupil, Willow),* reinforcing the idea that some students may wish to conceal their identity of a perceived difference.

Following this, Otto discussed how his educational experiences were not vastly different to other mainstream students:

> *Mainstream students when they need help with questions, might also get help from the teacher. So it's not that different when I get help from my mainstream teacher compared to when a mainstream student gets help. (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*

However, some students shared that the mainstream environment limits their ability to be themselves. John outlined that his behaviour may be seen as 'weird' in the mainstream, *"When I do something I enjoy, it would be a little less weird [in Arc] than if I done it in mainstream" (John, Pupil, Arc)*.

As students from the SRP navigate differing expectations across the SRP and mainstream settings, some engage in masking to conceal aspects of their identity and adapt their behaviour to conform in mainstream spaces. Several staff across both schools noted that students presented differently in different environments:

> *A lot of our kids are completely different characters in mainstream lessons than they are at the base. They are so comfortable in the base, they are loud and boisterous, and they'll be busting jokes and laughing and really loud. And then as soon as you see them in the mainstream environment, they embody anxiety. They're just really quiet and fiddling with their pen, and they don't like talking, they whisper to you. (Lyra, LSA, Willow)*

In Northgate, this shift in behaviour was also observed by Cora, who described students changing behaviour to fit into social groups:

> *When I see him with his other [mainstream] friends, it's like he's trying to impress them and he's trying to mimic their behaviours to fit in with the group. But then he's a soft, shy kid when he's with his Arc friends. (Cora, Teacher, Northgate).*

Adapting behaviour and hiding aspects of identity highlights the challenges students from the SRP face in navigating multiple identities and the ongoing negotiation of identity, shaped by self-perceptions and external social expectations.

4.5.2 Navigating Visible Difference: The Impact of Stigma and 'Othering'

Some students distanced themselves from the SRP label as the student's 'base identity' emerges as an observable social marker that can lead to stigmatisation, negative peer perceptions and bullying. In Rosehill, the name of the SRP is used by mainstream students to cause offence, as Lyra illustrated, *"I remember these two mainstream kids screaming at each other in the corridor, 'Go back to Willow!' 'Go back to Willow!' Neither of them were Willow kids. But it's used as an insult, like a derogatory term" (Lyra, LSA).* Similarly in Northgate, ability-based grouping can lead to social divisions. Cora discussed how lower sets, where Arc students are often placed, create 'immediate separation', and reinforce a narrative of difference which carries stigma:

> *We have the blue, red and white band… there is this speaking down about the kids that are in the lower set. And kids tease each other 'well, you're in white band' and they use it as an insult. (Cora, Teacher, Northgate)*

The concept of 'othering' is particularly evident in how students from the SRP are perceived and treated within the school environment. Lyra articulated this powerfully, noting that removing students from mainstream lessons to Willow, *"Puts that on them where they are 'the other', rather than one of everyone else" (Lyra, LSA, Willow)*.

Some students also highlighted how their behaviour is scrutinised by mainstream peers, reinforcing a sense of being 'different'. Tanya shared how she felt observed and judged in the mainstream, *"Because I'm worried all of them are gonna stare at me" (Tanya, Pupil, Arc)*. The staff across both schools highlighted that there can be negative perceptions among mainstream students of the SRP. Yanis, from Rosehill, shared, *"I have heard students say comments like 'oh, you're so Willow' and it's just horrible to hear" (Yanis, Teacher, Rosehill)*. Staff also shared that mainstream students showed a lack of understanding, particularly when the behaviour of students from the SRP was perceived to be different or challenging *"Depending on the presentation, some kids are bullied" (Lyra, LSA, Willow)*.

For some students, this extended beyond feelings of exclusion and escalated into distressing incidences of bullying. This finding was not an isolated theme but was raised by both students and teachers in both schools. Midnight shared, "*People in the mainstream school they say stuff behind my*

back but I manage to make sure I don't get too offended by it" (Midnight, Pupil, Arc). John recalled incidences of being physically and verbally targeted, *"Some will now and again, just pressure me for no reason… Like at the randomest times, they push me" (John, Pupil, Arc)*. Similarly, Pedro expressed feeling unsure why students were treating him this way, *"I'm getting bullied for no reason. For no reason" (Pedro, Pupil, Arc)*. This relates to Sza's recollection of a friend's experience of bullying solely for being in Willow, "*I remember my friend telling me she used to be bullied just for being in Willow, just for being how she is, she got bullied a lot" (Sza, Pupil, Willow).*

Faced with stigma and othering, students from the SRP adopted different strategies to navigate their school environment. Some students attempted to resist the SRP identity by aligning themselves with mainstream students, expressing a preference for the mainstream to maintain a sense of 'normality.' Otto described how participating in mainstream lessons allowed him to feel less different, *"I still feel that I do [belong in mainstream] due to the amount of mainstream lessons I have… Meaning, it can still feel normal being in said lessons" (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*. Others, however, internalise this stigma and perception of difference impacting their self-esteem. Jade noted how negative messaging over time can deeply affect the students' confidence, *"A lot of the students have very low self-esteem and I just hear them talk negatively about themselves, that makes me really sad" (Jade, Teacher, Northgate)*.

Another strategy students employ is masking, touched on in the previous subtheme. Several students described how they felt free to be themselves within the SRP but concealed aspects of their identity in mainstream settings. John outlined the difficulty in being yourself due to peer perceptions,

“Whenever, kids when they be themselves, one of them's gonna bully you” (John, Pupil, Arc). Fatima observed that students from Arc changed behaviours to ‘fit in’ with mainstream students, *“There’s not many of the Arc students that have outside friends from Arc. And if there are, they're the ones that kind of mask their problems” (Fatima, TA)*. Nick described a student who exhibited stark differences in behaviour depending on the environment, “*He’d have the wildest time in Willow. It'd be time to go up to class and suddenly… he’s just like a shell of himself” (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*. During my observations, I noted such differences in some students' presentations within the mainstream and SRP. For example, Pedro engaged in stimming behaviour when in Arc, which was not observed during his mainstream lesson.

Staff perspectives on stigma revealed some contradictory narratives. Some staff argued that the high number of neurodivergent students makes stigmatisation less pronounced*, “So I think just by sheer quantity, SEN is not stigmatised at Rosehill as much as it probably is in other schools” (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*. While some staff members believe that inclusion efforts mitigate stigma, others argued that the school does not do enough to address these issues. Yanis highlighted how a passive approach to discrimination allows stigma to persist, *“There can be a tendency to pick the easier route and just… not hear something or if it's something that can be perceived as a joke to just leave it” (Yanis, Teacher, Rosehill)*. In Arc, Fatima stressed the need for greater awareness about neurodiversity and individual differences:

> *I don't think that they're [mainstream students] made aware enough of the different needs of the students. So I do try and voice my opinions*

and let them know because my belief is whether you have an additional need or not, everyone's different. (Fatima, TA, Arc)

4.5.3 Awareness of Neurodiversity to Cultivate Understanding

According to some staff and students, it is the lack of neurodiversity awareness that leads to misconceptions and social exclusion. Some students shared situations which indicate other students may lack understanding of SEN:

Otto: People like the table behind me, even in the seat right next to me tend to…[Pauses] my behaviour in science…gets pointed out quite a lot.

Me: How does that make you feel when they do that?

Otto: Pointing out isn't necessarily good.

In Northgate, Fatima shared that some mainstream students seemed to be unaware of Arc, *"Because students ask, 'what's Arc?' and trying to explain it to them, they don't get. I feel like the school needs to do more to let people know" (Fatima, TA)*. In Rosehill, Lyra also highlighted the need for the school to 'do more' and attributed the challenges the students from Willow face to the lack of teaching about neurodiversity and the SRP:

We have bases, but I don't think we have enough assemblies or sessions where we talk about what autism is, and it feels like because of that lack of understanding, empathy and knowledge, there is some issues amongst the mainstream where bullying is a thing. (Lyra, LSA, Willow)

Overall staff recognised that promoting awareness of the SRP and educating students about autism, neurodiversity and SEN could be a positive step towards inclusion, *“It is an area where we could improve to embrace the differences a little bit more” (Cora, Teacher, Northgate)*. Ava shared that in her role as Head of House at Rosehill, she has had individual conversations with mainstream students that have supported their understanding of students from Willow’s neurodivergence:

> *If the other kid doesn't know [about the student’s autism], sometimes it only takes a ‘I don't think you're aware of the level of need that this kid has’ and they're like, ‘Oh yeah, they are part of Willow’ and they recognise that as something that is maybe out of their control and something that they can sympathise with, if not empathise with, so they do have generally a pretty good awareness of this. (Ava, Teacher, Rosehill)*

As Head of Arc, Stephanie discussed teaching tutor groups about neurodiversity to foster understanding of the needs of their classmate:

> *We’ve got a student who is very direct, will say out loud what he thinks, so other students find this very annoying. In those situations we had to intervene and make a whole class discussion about neurodiversity, accepting and understanding. (Stephanie, Head of Arc)*

However, Stephanie also shared that teaching students about neurodiversity did not always resolve challenges:

> *It can feel like the students are being targeted because they are autistic. Or is it because as personalities they would clash anyway… For*

> *example, with Year 12s, it was completely different type of conversation. It was quite interesting to see that the students did share their concerns about 'yes, we understand that part [about the student's autism]* ***but****…', that's quite interesting to hear the other side. (Stephanie, Head of Arc)*

Some of the staff had ideas about how neurodiversity could be celebrated within the school to promote awareness. Lyra shared, *"I would love for one or two of our kids to be a spokesperson and talk about their experience" (Lyra, LSA, Willow).* Linking to the previous subtheme, staff time was reported as a potential difficulty in prioritising such a whole-school approach:

> *I haven't voiced it because I just don't think it would be done. And if I bring it up, then maybe the responsibility would be on me to organise an assembly and I don't have the capacity for that. (Lyra, LSA, Willow)*

4.6 Theme 5: The Dynamic and Contextual Nature of Belonging

This theme, as shown in Figure 12, encapsulates how belonging is an evolving process that students experience dynamically shaped by relationships, time, contexts and individual experiences.

Figure 12

Theme 5 Thematic Map

4.6.1 Belonging as a Multidimensional Experience

In line with the epistemological stance of this research, rather than imposing a singular definition, this section attends to the ways students made sense of belonging. As students described belonging experiences, their sense of belonging appeared to emerge from other factors and concepts identified within the wider belonging literature, including emotional experiences, connection, acceptance, engagement and relationships.

4.6.1.1. Emotional Belonging. Belonging was described as linked with positive emotions by the students, *"'Happy', 'Support', well they go to belonging", (Pedro, Pupil, Arc)*, while feelings of not belonging were described more negatively, *"Isolated", "Left out" (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*. For Sza, this emotional dimension of belonging was strongly tied to being accepted for who they are, *"Willow [is where I belong most] because there's more people with my kind of condition" (Sza, Pupil, Willow)*. Midnight expressed feeling accepted because of the schools' inclusivity, *"I feel like my school is definitely interested in people like me. Especially when it comes to the school's general way of*

being inclusive, I think people like me add to that" (Midnight, Pupil, Arc). This sense of acceptance allowed students to experience connection to school, *"Belonging is somewhere you should feel accepted" (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*. These narratives suggest that belonging is rooted in emotional security and acceptance for many students. It is shaped by feeling supported by peers and staff, being seen and understood.

4.6.1.2. Relational Belonging. Students understood the role of relationships, with both staff and peers as contributing to their sense of belonging, *"I think belonging means having a place in the world and having people there to support you as you experience your life" (Midnight, Pupil, Arc)*. Friendships were frequently cited as the most valued part of school life*, "Getting to see my friends, my favourite teachers" (Sza, Pupil, Willow)*.

4.6.1.3. Participatory Belonging. In contrast to the emotional and relational experiences described by students, school staff often framed students' sense of belonging in terms of active involvement and engagement. Participation in school life, through lessons, activities, and attendance, was framed as both a sign of and a facilitator of belonging. Yanis suggested that a student's experience of inclusion is dependent on students' willingness, *"Their inclusion in the classroom… is partly kind of down to how willing they are to engage with the process as well" (Yanis, Teacher, Rosehill)*. Some staff recognised that students found a sense of community by taking part in form time, trips, or whole-school events, *"They might not necessarily be in mainstream lessons, but they're still taking part in form and trips" (Yanis, Teacher, Rosehill)*. Academic achievement and recognition also contributed to students' sense of belonging. John noted how he felt his efforts were

appreciated in Arc, "*My speech and language teacher actually appreciates when I got a pretty hard question done or done a decent amount of work" (John, Pupil, Arc)*. In contrast, he felt that this praise was lacking in mainstream, *"We do so much work, but he doesn't… appreciate what you do" (John, Pupil, Arc)*. For some students, participation in extracurricular activities such as clubs were key spaces of belonging. Pedro identified that he felt happiest and most accepted when *"In Warhammer club"*.

4.6.1.4. Belonging to Community. Students and staff acknowledged that both schools tried to promote belonging through community messaging, initiatives and events to demonstrate pride within the school. Nick described how visible community engagement was being encouraged, *"We run a few community events that really help with that general school culture" (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*. Jade reflected how a sense of belonging among staff contributes to the overall cohesion of the school community:

> *We have lots of teachers who have been teaching here for 10, 15, 20 years. And teachers that went to school here that came back, I think that's a big that's really indication of sense of belonging. (Jade, Teacher, Arc)*

Attendance was also seen by staff as an indicator of belonging. Nick reflected, *"If you want to talk about how included our students feel, I'd say the fact that our attendance is broadly on par with mainstream" (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*.

4.6.2 Negotiating Belonging Across Contexts

In this study, belonging emerged as a multifaceted, contextual experience constructed through students' interactions with people and environments. While the SRP provided connection, safety and shared identity, belonging in mainstream settings was more challenging, requiring students to navigate differing expectations, peer dynamics, and structural barriers.

For many students, the SRP represents a space where they feel most at ease as it offers a strong sense of safety and support. This environment fosters belonging through shared experiences, understanding, and strong relationships. Nadia explicitly identified *"Willow, 100%"* as a place of comfort and security. Similarly, Otto highlighted the role of support in fostering belonging, *"The support that Willow gives and how it helps to make me feel like I belong more" (Otto, Pupil, Willow)*. Sza explained how shared experiences with peers in Willow reinforced his sense of connection, "*I'd say Willow because there's more people like me, with my kind of condition. Yeah, I feel Willow is where I belong the most" (Sza, Pupil).* However, while the SRP is perceived positively, some students also express ambivalence towards it. John, for example, acknowledged that his experience of Arc was not always consistent, "*It's good and all, but just sometimes it's annoying. Sometimes I feel like they're doing a bit much" (John, Pupil, Arc).*

In contrast to the SRP, the mainstream environment presented greater challenges for students in terms of feeling accepted and included, reflected in Tanya's response:

Me: 'It is hard for people like me to be accepted in the…'

Tanya: Mainstream.

Other factors, such as academic difficulties, further exacerbate feelings of disconnection. Stephanie described how challenges in accessing the curriculum contribute to students feeling isolated and disengaged:

> *A lot of them find it very difficult to access big chunks of the curriculum that everyone else is accessing. It's anxiety-provoking, depressing, negative… It can have an impact on self-esteem and sometimes lead to students not wanting to come anymore, feeling unmotivated and isolated. (Stephanie, Head of Arc)*

For some students, these experiences resulted in a clear preference for the SRP over the mainstream environment, *"Well, it's better than being in mainstream" (Tanya, Pupil, Arc)*, and finding that the SRP benefited their learning, *"You actually learn more [in Arc] than in your mainstream class" (John, Pupil, Arc)*. These reflections show that belonging in the mainstream necessitates more than mere presence, it depends on students feeling socially accepted and academically included.

While some students identified with the SRP, for others, belonging was more dynamic and context-dependent. John struggled to place his sense of belonging within a singular category*, "I don't know if I can answer that because it's a little bit of everything" (John, Pupil, Arc)*. Similarly, Otto emphasised how having access to mainstream lessons influenced his feelings of belonging, "*I still feel that I do [belong in mainstream] due to the amount of mainstream*

lessons I have" (Otto, Pupil, Willow). Other students, like Midnight, found that a combination of factors, including teachers, relationships, and the overall school environment, contributed to their sense of belonging, *"I think the teachers and everything combined helps me feel I can belong in school" (Midnight, Pupil, Arc)*.

However, some students struggled with their dual identity between the SRP and the mainstream school and how to place their sense of belonging. When asked about belonging to the 'whole school', students often shared uncertainty and ambivalence, *"I'm not necessarily sure" (John, Pupil, Arc)*. Additionally, Fatima recalled that some students from Arc demonstrated confusion about their placement in the SRP, *"Some of the students don't know why they're in the base. I've had students ask me, 'what's wrong with me, Miss?' 'Have I got ADHD?' 'Have I got autism?'". (Fatima, TA, Arc).*

4.6.3 The Changing Nature of Belonging Over Time

Over time, as students developed and moved through school, this appeared to impact their sense of belonging to the school community. Students in the Research Group observed that younger students often sought to appear more 'mainstream'. Thomas and Drew recalled resisting SRP support in lessons in Year 7 and 8, feeling it made them stand out and was 'forced' on them. Over time, they shared that they came to value the academic support while recognising the social barriers it created. Tanya expressed how her sense of identity and belonging within Arc has strengthened as she is now one of the oldest students, *"[I feel proud to belong…] in Arc because I'm the oldest now*

here" (Tanya, Pupil, Arc). This demonstrates how, over time, students develop a stronger connection to their environment.

Some students described how their ability to connect with others improved as they progressed through school. Tanya reflected on how her confidence in socialising had changed, *"Well, now I do [like socialising]. In olden times it wasn't so easy" (Tanya, Pupil, Arc)*. The SRP plays an important role in fostering social connections, particularly for students who may have struggled to form relationships in primary school. Nick highlighted how some students arrived at secondary school with limited social experience. Over time, however, they developed the skills necessary to engage with peers, *"Some of them lived a bit of a solitary existence in primary school... but I think we do a good job on that front" (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*.

Some of the students' experiences in primary school appeared to influence their sense of belonging at secondary school. Fatima noted that younger students, particularly those without existing friendships, tended to struggle more with belonging, *"The younger ones struggle a lot more, especially if they don't know anyone already in the school" (Fatima, TA, Arc)*. The transition to secondary school can be overwhelming, particularly for students who found primary school difficult. Nadia recalled the intensity of academic expectations upon starting secondary school, "*It was just so much. From going from 9 till 3 in primary school where you got homework once a week to that, that was like, woah" (Nadia, Pupil, Willow)*. Nick further observed that many students in Willow had negative experiences in primary school, which shaped their difficulties in belonging at secondary school:

> *The one thing that seems to unite our students is none of them had a good time at primary school. Maybe that's why they end up with EHCPs in the first place, if you're an autistic child, but you're actually fine and having a good time at primary school, no one's going to raise the flag for support. (Nick, Willow Coordinator)*

Conversely, Otto shared feeling a sense of belonging in his primary school, despite it not having an SRP, "*It didn't have a base, but I still felt like I belonged"* (Otto, Pupil, Willow).

Stephanie reflected that some students initially struggle when starting secondary school but eventually recognise that they are supported, *"It takes a while, but I think they see that we are consistent" (Stephanie, Head of Arc)*. Fatima similarly emphasised how building trust and getting to know students on a personal level can build those key relationships, *"We take that extra time to get to know them on a personal level, we ask them what they like, what they don't like. We literally get to know them one to one" (Fatima, TA, Arc)*.

Students having agency and autonomy in their education appeared to shape belonging experiences. Over time, students' independence grew which enabled them to more confidently navigate differing environments and situations. Sza described how his need for a TA decreased as he progressed through school, *"When I started, I had a TA in every lesson... But then starting Year 8, I had a TA in less of my lessons, and then I realised I actually don't need a TA in every lesson" (Sza, Pupil, Willow).*

As students grow and mature, their self-perception and understanding of belonging also evolve. Tanya reflected on how she found Year 12 *"a lot better"*

than her earlier years. Nick observed similar changes in students, noting how Otto developed within themselves and their social skills, *“He was a very serious character in Year 7, all business, no play. [Nick laughs]. And now he's much more open to having light-hearted discussions and jokes” (Nick, Willow Coordinator).* It also takes time for the young people to find their voice. Stephanie described how younger students are reluctant to express themselves but gradually gain the confidence to do so, *“We might start in Year 7 with a child sitting in silence during meetings, and it’s painful to watch. But we work with them, support them, and eventually, they start to share more” (Stephanie, Head of Arc)*. For Nadia, receiving a diagnosis later in her school journey provided validation and a sense of relief, which helped her inclusion within the mainstream, *“Before the diagnosis, I got very anxious to go to mainstream. After that, it kind of got easier” (Nadia, Pupil, Willow)*.

This temporal aspect demonstrates that belonging is not only relational and contextual, but also evolves as students progress through school.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

SRPs offer an alternative approach to inclusion that is gaining wider attention within the literature (Strogilos & Ward, 2024). Through a lens of belonging, this study explored the inclusion of students attending SRPs for autism and SLCN in mainstream secondary schools to illuminate SRPs' position within this ongoing dilemma. This was achieved by drawing on belonging frameworks by Allen et al. (2021), which account for individual experiences of belonging (Integrative Framework for Belonging), and Allen & Kern's (2017) BPSEM, which considers systemic influences in fostering belonging. This chapter explores the findings in relation to the RQs and the wider literature, concluding with contributions to knowledge, study limitations, recommendations for future research, and implications for practice. The discussion examines the findings across both SRP settings collectively, where notable differences in school practices and student experiences emerged, these are highlighted and examined in detail.

5.2 RQ1: How do Students Attending an SRP in a Mainstream Secondary School Experience Belonging?

Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework serves as an overarching structure for this section, as it draws on a conceptual review that unites core perspectives of belonging, thereby facilitating a discussion of relevant theories. Before exploring how students experienced belonging, it is important to acknowledge the role of external influences, emphasising an ecosystemic view

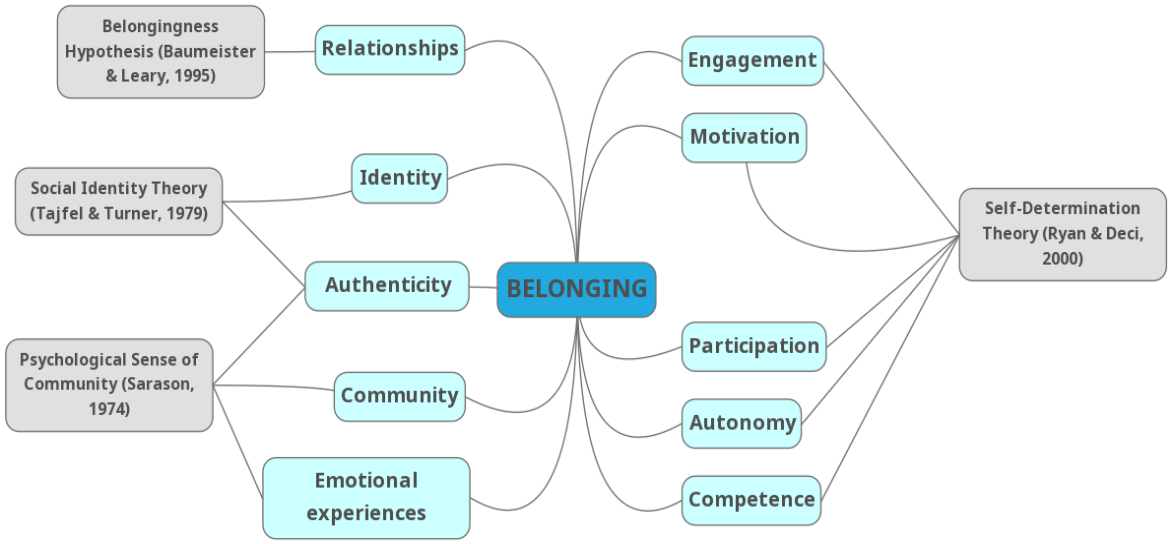
in which belonging arises from interactions between individuals and their environments, as outlined in Allen and Kern's (2017) BPSEM. The findings will utilise Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework to examine students' experiences of belonging (RQ1) and specifically how belonging varies across the SRP and mainstream (RQ2). Subsequently, the findings will then draw on Allen and Kern's (2017) BPSEM to consider how belonging can be supported (RQ3).

5.2.1 Belonging as a Contextual and Dynamic Experience

Traditional theories of belonging, such as the 'belongingness hypothesis' (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, frame belonging as a psychological need that describes a 'static' experience of belonging (Mahar et al., 2013). Although the students did not explicitly refer to theoretical concepts of belonging, their accounts centred on key relational, psychological, emotional, and motivational experiences, including relationships with peers and teachers, feelings of connection, relating to others, and social dynamics, which can be mapped onto broader constructs within the literature on belonging. These findings suggest that no single psychological, social, or motivational theory can fully explain the complexity of students' belonging experiences. Instead, the findings reflected many of the concepts associated with these belonging models but approached them as interconnected aspects of a broader, multifaceted understanding of belonging. Figure 13 highlights the key concepts that emerged from students' experiences of belonging, along with the relevant theories outlined within the literature review.

Figure 13

Belonging as Connected to Other Concepts Based on the Study's Findings



The students' accounts highlighted a broad definition of belonging linked to concepts found within belonging literature and a situational sense of belonging influenced by the interactions and environments that students navigated, such as the SRP and mainstream school. For example, the 'Negotiating Dual Identities' theme illustrates that many students experienced a shifting sense of belonging across different spaces, affected by relationships and environments. Instead, student experiences are better understood through a dynamic and holistic lens, viewing belonging as an evolving process shaped by the interaction of multiple, interconnected factors, as proposed by Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework. In this framework, belonging is experienced dynamically through four interrelated components: Competencies, Opportunities, Motivations, and Perceptions, all shaped by varying contexts. By

mapping students' lived experiences of belonging onto Allen et al.'s (2021) framework, a more holistic understanding emerges that captures the fluid nature of belonging experiences, particularly for students attending SRPs.

5.2.2 Competencies for Belonging

5.2.2.1. Relationships. Students in this study demonstrated these competencies through their ability to form connections with both peers and adults. The significance of students' relationships has been consistently linked to a sense of belonging for neurodivergent learners (Osborne & Redd, 2011). Findings from the current study reinforce this literature as relationships with staff from the SRPs were highlighted as a foundation for students' school experiences in both schools by providing emotional support and advocating for their needs. Students in both settings described casual, friendly interactions with SRP staff and stated they felt genuinely understood and listened to, in contrast to prior research suggesting that autistic students feel misunderstood by their teachers in mainstream schools (Goodall, 2018).

Students' ability to initiate and maintain friendships within the SRPs also reflects their interpersonal and communicative competencies. This suggests their skills are not inherently lacking, but rather context-dependent, supporting the idea that competencies are not fixed traits but emerge in supportive environments, such as the SRP. While relational belonging is widely recognised (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995), this study shows that not any peer connection fosters belonging, but rather those friendships in which students could be their authentic selves.

5.2.2.2. Authenticity. Milton's (2012) double empathy problem posits that both autistic and non-autistic individuals may struggle to understand each other's perspectives due to differing cognitive and communicative styles. Studies find that autistic students often prefer friendships with other autistic peers, as these relationships offer greater understanding, connection, and relatability (Chen et al., 2021; Crompton et al., 2023). In line with this, SRPs seem to facilitate students in being their authentic selves and building relationships (Hebron & Bond, 2017; O'Hagan & Hebron, 2017).

The findings of this study showed that students' ability to 'be themselves' with peers they could relate to, without masking or fear of judgment, was described primarily within the SRPs. Students in both SRPs reported that it was more comfortable and easier to make friends with students in the SRP than with students in the mainstream. As Otto (Willow) highlighted, *"It tends to be more familiar with them as we are all in the same base and we can understand each other a lot better".* This provides a novel insight into how peer relationships develop in SRPs for autistic students, particularly the importance of authenticity.

5.2.3 Opportunities for Belonging

While relationships can be positioned within 'competencies', they can also be seen as contingent upon available or provided opportunities. In this study, the SRP served as a critical opportunity structure, offering consistent access to trusted relationships, emotional and academic support, and peer networks that were often unavailable or more difficult to access in the mainstream. While Allen et al.'s (2021) framework includes 'opportunities', this study highlights that it may underemphasise the school's role in either enabling

or constraining them. For example, the mainstream school limited such opportunities due to stigma, environmental barriers, and a lack of relational safety, meaning opportunities were not equitably distributed. Drawing on the Capability Approach (Sen, 1999), this emphasises that students' inclusion depends not only on the presence of opportunities but also on their real freedom to turn those resources into meaningful outcomes. In this study, the SRP appeared to extend students' capabilities by providing tailored support, enabling social and academic engagement. Significantly, this study also adds to Allen et al.'s (2021) framework by demonstrating that 'opportunities' for belonging cannot be understood in isolation and should be examined through a systemic and structural lens. In doing so, it foregrounds the importance of evaluating not just the presence of opportunities but their equitable accessibility, a dimension that schools should actively facilitate. By drawing on the Capability Approach, this study adds a more critical lens to Allen et al.'s model, highlighting the need for school environments to be designed not just to provide opportunities but also to ensure that all students have the real capability to access and benefit from them in ways that foster belonging, for example, matching opportunities to students' relational, sensory, and communication needs, emphasising the importance of the SRP environment within mainstream schools.

5.2.4 Perceptions of Belonging

5.2.4.1. Emotional Security. The emotional dimension of belonging is well-documented in the literature, with belonging described as a feeling of trust, safety and value (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). Similarly, students in this study articulated belonging through emotional experiences, describing feeling "safe",

“happy”, “comfortable” and “understood”, particularly in the SRPs. The experience of belonging was deeply connected to feelings of acceptance and emotional security within the SRPs.

5.2.4.2. Community and Identity. Belonging is commonly understood as a relational and emotional experience linked to feeling connected and valued within a group, place, or community (Mahar et al., 2013; Sarason, 1974). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) adds that individuals derive their self-concept from group memberships and seek a positive social identity. However, belonging to a group becomes complex when aspects of one’s identity, such as one’s neurodiversity or the expression of their authentic self, are stigmatised, as this can disrupt belonging and shape self-perception, influencing how they view their place within social contexts (Walton & Brady, 2017).

The study's findings reinforce such theoretical perspectives while offering insights specific to the experiences of students attending autism and SLCN SRPs. Students in this study across both settings frequently discussed the SRP as a place for community while highlighting the existence of in-group/out-group distinctions between the SRP and the mainstream. Some students demonstrated pride and solidarity within their in-group membership, reflecting a stronger sense of belonging to the SRP. Students’ perception of being part of an in-group (e.g., SRP) versus being ‘othered’ in the mainstream shaped their sense of belonging, where their identities were more likely to be stigmatised. This suggests models of belonging, such as Social Identity Theory, which focus solely on group affiliation, are insufficient, as belonging was undermined not by a lack of group affiliation but by environments that failed to

recognise, accommodate and validate their identity. As students move between both environments, this contrast in belonging becomes particularly significant and will be examined further under RQ2.

5.2.5 Motivations to Belong

One dimension of Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework that was less significant in this study is the motivation to belong. The findings highlight that belonging among students attending SRPs is a dynamic and context-dependent process, making this intrinsic need less relevant. Nevertheless, some aspects related to motivation emerged from the findings.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) is a comprehensive theory of human motivation that holds significance beyond the belonging literature. It suggests that motivation relies on experiencing relatedness (which can map onto belonging), having autonomy, and feeling competent. Some students exhibited increased autonomy over time as they required less support from TAs. However, SDT's conceptualisation of belonging primarily centres on students' individual motivation, thereby overlooking external influences. While Allen et al.'s (2021) framework recognises motivation as a key component of belonging, this study highlights the importance of considering how other experiences and contexts, such as stigma and bullying, affect motivation.

5.2.6 Social, Cultural, Environmental, and Temporal Contexts and Experiences

Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework acknowledges that the components of belonging do not exist in isolation, but are overlapping and shaped by broader social, cultural, environmental, and temporal contexts and

experiences. This study highlighted that the SRP and mainstream contexts significantly shaped and influenced the students' experiences of belonging. For example, when viewed through the 'competencies' lens, students demonstrated greater skills in developing friendships within the SRP, where the environment facilitated these interactions. In contrast, the mainstream environment presented challenges such as stigma and exclusion, hindering social inclusion.

5.2.7 Belonging for Students Attending SRPs

Overall, this study positions belonging as a dynamic, context-dependent process consistent with Allen et al.'s (2021) definition while extending it to reflect the fluidity and complexity of belonging as experienced by students attending autism and SLCN SRPs. It highlights the challenges associated with students making sense of their belonging across two environments, along with the added complexities of neurodivergence, which can lead to masking and experiences of stigma. For students attending SRPs, belonging is not only dynamic but appears to be a fragmented experience that depends on feeling emotionally safe, authentically connected, and supported by environments responsive and consistent to their sensory, social, and communication needs. This theoretical contribution is further discussed in Section 5.5.2.

The findings emphasise the need for a flexible, context-sensitive understanding of belonging grounded in emotional safety, authentic relationships, identity, community acceptance, and appropriate environmental and systemic adjustments. The following section examines how students navigated these complexities within both the SRP and mainstream contexts.

5.3 RQ2: How do Students Experience Belonging within the SRP and Mainstream Settings?

As students experienced belonging as a fluid and context-dependent process shaped by their movement between the SRP and mainstream, it is important to understand their experiences within each environment. The findings reveal a complex and contrasting picture of belonging in which students navigate inclusion, exclusion, identity, and safety across two distinct educational contexts.

5.3.1 Contextual Overview of Willow and Arc

Before presenting how students experienced belonging within the SRP and mainstream settings, it is important to highlight the contextual and operational details of the two SRPs, Willow and Arc, that shaped students' experiences. Overall, the SRPs shared several key characteristics; both were located within the same LA, supporting students with autism and/or SLCN. The SRPs shared comparable school environments and an ethos of inclusion, and they facilitated mainstream access through TA/keyworker support. Despite being broadly similar, two structural and operational differences were identified.

5.3.1.1. SRP Size and Peer Dynamics. Willow caters to a larger number of pupils, which staff felt facilitated friendships, ensuring all students had friends and were not left out. In contrast, Arc’s smaller cohort led to more solitary activities, such as computer use or reading. These patterns suggest that while students and staff in both SRPs recognised the importance of authentic peer connections, subtle variations in structure and social dynamics may have influenced the students’ experiences of belonging differently.

5.3.1.2. Approaches to Mainstream Access. The key difference between the schools was the degree of flexibility regarding attendance in mainstream lessons. Willow adopted a flexible, ‘tiered approach’, delivering some lessons in smaller groups, tailoring mainstream access according to students' individual needs. This approach offered greater emotional containment and a higher level of specialised support. However, it may have also contributed to lowered expectations, particularly in the mainstream, where students were reportedly supported less proactively and informally ‘excluded’ to the SRP. In contrast, Arc consistently expected students to participate fully in all mainstream lessons, with no formal teaching in Arc. This approach may have promoted stronger inclusive practices among mainstream staff, as illustrated by more positive staff attitudes regarding Northgate School’s mainstream inclusion.

These contextual differences aid in interpreting the subtle variations in students’ experiences of belonging. However, considering the numerous shared features and similarities in the findings across both schools, the following sections present the findings collectively, emphasising key variations where appropriate.

5.3.2 Belonging within the SRP

5.3.2.1. Safety. The SRPs consistently emerged as a primary source of belonging in both schools, where students found a safe, supportive space to engage more comfortably with their peers and teachers. Both teachers and students described the SRPs as a ‘safe space’, offering physical and emotional containment, predictability, acceptance and community. Milton and Sims' (2016) work highlights the importance of autistic-led and affirming spaces for autistic

adults in addition to the broader literature on the importance of safe spaces in mainstream schools for autistic students (Goodall, 2018; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Tobias, 2009). In this study, safety within the SRPs was multidimensional, including physical safety (e.g., quiet, sensory-sensitive environments), relational safety (e.g., consistent adult support), and emotional safety (e.g., being understood and accepted).

5.3.2.2. Peer Relationships and Connection. For many students, the SRPs provided a space where their needs were understood, enabling them to be their 'authentic selves' and to build meaningful connections with peers. Across both SRPs, the importance of the SRP for friendships and providing a peer group with whom students could relate to was highlighted, reflecting research on parent and pupil perceptions of SRPs (Hebron & Bond, 2017; O'Hagan & Hebron, 2017). Expanding this, the SRPs acted as a small community that most students felt a part of, contributing to strong relationships and a sense of safety.

5.3.2.3. Multi-Purpose Space. Furthermore, most students indicated that the support of the SRPs allowed them to engage academically through small group interventions and learning support in the mainstream, enabling students to learn with appropriate differentiation and adaptation. The students also emphasised the role of the SRP beyond merely being a physical space, serving as a place for emotional regulation and connection. This finding aligns with research on the emotional support and containment provided by SRPs (Halsall et al., 2021).

5.3.2.4. Dilemma of SRPs. Although most students described experiences of belonging associated with the SRPs, the findings indicated that they also marked students as different, representing aspects of exclusion. In Rosehill, some mainstream students used the SRP label as an insult, reinforcing out-group dynamics. Similarly, at Northgate, students displayed stigma towards those in the low-ability grouping, often comprising students with SEN. This reflects the tensions inherent within inclusion debates, including the Dilemma of Difference (Minow, 1990), whereby the frequent use of the SRP was perceived as exclusionary, with some teachers expressing concern that it could impede students' social development and inclusion in the mainstream environment. Thus, the SRP functioned as both a supportive and protective environment and a visible marker of difference. This further illustrates the complexity and contextual nature of belonging, wherein students feel they belong in certain aspects of school life, but this sense of belonging is challenged in others.

5.3.3 Belonging within the Mainstream School

5.3.3.1. Opportunities and Barriers. The mainstream school presented a more ambivalent space for belonging. While framed as offering opportunities, such as social development, academic opportunities, and exposure to ‘real-life’ situations, the findings from both SRPs suggest these outcomes were only partially realised. Students faced challenges in mainstream environments, including limited peer interactions, sensory overwhelm, and insufficient differentiation of teaching practices. While mainstream access is framed as an ‘opportunity’, this study found that mainstream settings often lacked the social and environmental support necessary to make participation meaningful. This

echoes Allen et al.'s (2021) framework, which suggests that this opportunity, e.g., mainstream access, could support belonging, but only when underpinned by the social, cultural, and environmental contexts.

5.3.3.2. Sensory and Social Challenges. One of the most pressing barriers was the sensory environment of mainstream schools. Crowded hallways, loud environments, and a lack of neurodiversity awareness often left students feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and isolated, which aligns with research showing how environmental stressors contribute to anxiety and autistic burnout (Botha et al., 2022; Goodall, 2018). For many students, this restricted access to shared social spaces and limited participation in the mainstream led them to seek refuge in the SRPs to avoid sensory overload and social unpredictability. From a social model perspective, these challenges reflect environments shaped by neurotypical norms that fail to accommodate individual needs, resulting in a diminished sense of belonging. Further discussion of these structural influences is explored under RQ3.

5.3.4 Navigating Dual Identities

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the findings to the literature is the concept of dual identity for students attending autism and/or SLCN SRPs in mainstream secondary schools. In both schools, students and teachers described navigating conflicting expectations and experiences between the SRP and mainstream settings. Many students struggled to reconcile their sense of self across these two environments, which significantly shaped how they experienced belonging.

5.3.4.1. The Cost of Masking. Students and teachers in both settings described how discriminatory attitudes and peer bullying directed at students for being part of the SRP or for displaying behaviours related to their SEN negatively impacted their confidence and wellbeing. For some, these experiences escalated into more severe instances of bullying, contributing to feelings of rejection and a lack of belonging in the mainstream environment. Cultural narratives and social norms surrounding 'normal' behaviour often pressured students to mask their authentic selves within the mainstream, aligning with Myles et al.'s (2019) findings that autistic students changing their behaviour to fit in was important to their sense of belonging. This highlights the complex identity negotiations that students in this study faced as they navigated the SRP and mainstream environments, attempting to manage how others perceived them.

Additionally, the students were managing internalised social hierarchies, as being 'normal' was equated with acceptance and belonging. In this study, this became especially complex, as students were required to navigate and switch between these different social environments multiple times each day, meaning they constantly 'shifted' between masking and expressing their authentic selves, leading to exhaustion, as described by Nadia (Willow), *"I was pretty excited for mainstream…I was like, 'I can be finally normal again', but then I kind of crashed out…it was a lot for me"*. Across both SRPs, the students' reduction in masking within the SRP and their friendships with SRP students indicated the value that these spaces and relationships hold for belonging.

5.3.4.2. Identity in SRP and Mainstream Settings. Negative peer perceptions and broader school cultures where difference was not always accepted led to some internalised stigma, as several students described feeling ‘weird’ and ‘different’. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and wider disability identity debates highlight how identifying with one's neurodiversity or SEN can be a source of empowerment or a marker of marginalisation, depending on how they are perceived (Murugami, 2009; Shakespeare, 1996). Building on this theoretical foundation, the study found that the students often aligned themselves with the SRP in-group for safety and belonging, while some attempted to distance themselves from this identity to gain acceptance in the mainstream. This dual positioning created internal conflict and fluctuating belonging as these identity negotiations altered daily, depending on the lesson, teacher relationship, or peer behaviour, echoing the argument that belonging is dynamic and context-dependent in line with Allen et al.’s (2021) Integrative Framework. The findings expand understanding of how students in SRPs suppressed aspects of their identity in mainstream settings, contrasting with the more accepting environment within the SRP. This enhances the complexities in disability identity studies, whereby students possess a dual identity of both ‘base’ and ‘mainstream’ student, complicating their sense of self and belonging.

Positive identification with an autistic identity is linked to improved psychological wellbeing and a sense of security (Cooper et al., 2023; Goscicki et al., 2025). Three out of the seven autistic students in this study referenced their autistic identity, which aided them in connecting with peers who have similar experiences. However, staff at both schools noted that this label could be limiting when used by students to explain their disengagement from learning

by stating, “it’s because I’m autistic.” This highlights the need for environments that affirm neurodivergent identities while also supporting students in expressing and meeting their individual learning needs. It exemplifies the Dilemma of Difference (Norwich, 2008a), where schools must balance the affirmation of autistic identities with the provision of tailored support.

5.3.4.3. Dual Identity Dilemma. Students' navigation of dual identities illustrates Minow’s (1990) Dilemma of Difference. Although the SRP provides safety and affirmation, it also visibly marks students as different. This negotiation between two social worlds adds an important layer to existing literature, which often focuses on the benefits of SRPs without fully considering the psychological costs and impact on belonging. While previous research acknowledges that SRPs offer supportive environments (O’Hagan & Hebron, 2017; Strogilos & Ward, 2024), it has not thoroughly explored the complexity of students’ navigation between the SRP and the mainstream environment. By highlighting the challenges of managing two identities and the implications this has for belonging, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how inclusion efforts should also address the tensions and consequences of dual identity. Additionally, this study enhances our understanding of how the Dilemma of Difference manifests in SRPs, which will be explored in Section 5.5.1.

5.3.5 Toward a Divided Sense of Belonging

The students experienced a differing and divided sense of belonging between the SRP and mainstream. The SRP provided a reliable and affirming environment, while the mainstream offered conditional belonging opportunities that were frequently undermined by structural, sensory, and social barriers.

Although not all students faced these challenges in the same way, a consistent theme emerged regarding the difficulty of sustaining belonging across both settings simultaneously. A key finding was the changing nature of students' belonging, which continuously shifted as they were exposed to varying contexts, cultures, and experiences. Given the challenges to students' belonging in both contexts, it is important to consider what helps students feel accepted and connected to better understand how belonging can be supported in SRPs within mainstream secondary schools.

5.4 RQ3: What Facilitates Belonging for Students Attending an SRP in Mainstream Secondary Schools?

The findings demonstrated that belonging is actively shaped as students navigate between two diverse systems, the SRP and mainstream school. Each environment presents differing cultures, levels of staff training, curriculum accessibility, and attitudes toward neurodiversity. Applying Allen and Kern's (2017) BPSEM reveals the layered and sometimes conflicting influences students experience as they transition between both settings. This section utilises the BPSEM's structure to examine how these conditions facilitate or constrain belonging within the SRP inclusion model.

5.4.1 Biological and Individual Factors

While the biological and individual layers are not the primary focus of this section (having been addressed in previous sections), they provide context for understanding students' needs. Both SRPs catered to the students' sensory, social, and academic needs, highlighting the significance of tailored support. As

Otto (Willow) shared, *“I know that there are adults…who understand my needs and know what I need for proper learning”*. The role of the SRPs as a ‘safe space’ facilitated emotional containment and alleviated the sensory overwhelm experienced in mainstream settings.

In both schools, students’ motivation and attitude towards learning varied, with some finding it challenging, leading to disengagement, while others enjoyed and valued learning. Some students described ‘feeling forced’ to learn, which seemed to reflect not the compulsory nature of education but a lack of choice or flexibility in how they were expected to learn. This may stem from limited teaching approaches that cater to neurodivergent learners, such as differentiated tasks, structured and predictable routines, or multisensory and scaffolded support. These resources were more readily available within the SRPs or when supported by SRP staff in mainstream lessons.

5.4.2 Microsystem: SRP as a Nurturing Environment

The SRP served as a vital microsystem, providing academic, emotional, and relational support. In both SRPs, predictable routines, consistent staff, and familiar environments contributed to students' sense of security, while the students highly appreciated individualised and tailored interventions. The unique understanding of students’ needs by SRP staff facilitated their access to mainstream education. Relationships between the students and staff, as well as among peers, were consistently described as fundamental to a sense of belonging. Many students formed meaningful friendships with peers from the SRP. However, these friendships did not always extend to those in the mainstream, raising concerns about social inclusion within the broader school social environment.

5.4.2.1. Social Skills Support. While some staff in this study assumed that certain students did not want friends, research shows that many autistic young people experience loneliness, despite assumptions that autistic individuals are less motivated to seek friendship (Cribb et al., 2019). It is important to distinguish between genuine preferences and withdrawal due to past exclusion or negative experiences. One could argue that this mutual difficulty in understanding presents a core challenge in autism education (Jordan, 2008), touching on issues such as the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012). This lack of natural rapport underscores the importance for teachers in cultivating inclusive interactions and relationships (Jordan, 2008). Staff in both SRPs described actively supporting students' social development through natural interactions within the SRP, where they could intervene to offer support.

5.4.2.2. Relationships with Staff. Strong teacher-student relationships are key to students' sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Chiu et al., 2016), and this was particularly evident in students' relationships with SRP staff in both schools. These relationships were appreciated for emotional and academic support, with students recognising that staff from the SRP had a better understanding of their individual needs. The findings highlighted that less emphasis was on the particular strategies or support employed by the SRP staff and more on the importance of staff having the time and opportunity to cultivate meaningful relationships with individual students.

Some positive relationships extended to mainstream teachers, particularly in Willow, where mainstream staff delivered lessons within the SRP, facilitating consistent interactions in a familiar and supportive environment.

However, these opportunities were limited and, in some instances, such as in Arc, non-existent, reflecting broader challenges to inclusive practices, such as a lack of time and resources, identified in the literature (Goodall, 2018; Soan & Monsen, 2023).

5.4.2.3. Support from Teaching Assistants. Across both schools, students expressed mixed feelings about TA support in the mainstream, with some students rejecting additional support due to concerns about how they would be perceived, reflecting an internalised stigma and discomfort with perceived 'difference'. These findings resonate with the substantial body of research on TA deployment and practice in England, particularly the work of Webster and Blatchford (2017; 2019), who have long cautioned against models of support that risk promoting dependency and reinforcing exclusion. Staff described moving towards more discrete and autonomy-promoting models of support, such as reducing the physical proximity of TAs, mirroring recommendations by Webster et al. (2015) who advocate for a shift away from 'velcro'-ed support. Such an approach appears important in SRP contexts, where the dual challenge is to maintain individualised support while also enabling independence and participation in mainstream learning environments.

Additionally, the TAs in both SRPs described pressures to ensure students were accessing learning, despite lessons not being appropriately differentiated and tailored to the students' learning needs. All staff in the study highlighted a lack of dedicated time for collaboration and planning between the SRP and mainstream. Teachers reported relying on brief, informal conversations in corridors to raise concerns or ask questions. This reflects issues identified by Webster et al. (2016), whereby secondary teachers

frequently lacked time for collaboration with TAs. Given that TAs play a central role in supporting students in the SRP's learning, opportunities for meaningful collaboration between SRP and mainstream staff should be prioritised.

5.4.2.4. Attendance. Staff in both settings noted a connection between student attendance and belonging, indicating that students are more likely to attend school when they feel included. This aligns with research highlighting the reciprocal relationship between belonging and attendance, wherein a strong sense of school belonging can enhance attendance, and consistent attendance can reinforce students' connection to school (Allen & Boyle, 2022). Interestingly, one teacher at Northgate reflected that a pronounced sense of belonging among staff was evident in the number of long-serving teachers and former students who returned to work at the school, emphasising how feeling valued nurtures a long-term connection to the school community.

5.4.3 Mesosystem: Bridging the SRP and Mainstream

The mesosystem was particularly salient in this study as students continuously moved between the SRP and mainstream microsystems. Bronfenbrenner (1986) emphasises the importance of consistency and alignment across microsystems, as a lack of coherence may contribute to students experiencing tensions in belonging and identity. The identity negotiations between being a 'base student' and a 'mainstream student' illustrated the tensions within the mesosystem interactions resulting from misaligned expectations, practices, and culture between the SRP and mainstream. For instance, students in both SRPs described teachers as being more understanding in the SRP, whereas the mainstream was 'too strict' and lacked flexibility. These findings challenge the notion that placing students from

the SRP in mainstream classrooms leads to inclusion. Instead, the interactions among microsystems are key to bridging the gap between the SRP and mainstream.

5.4.3.1. Ability Grouping. Students from the SRP were often placed in low-ability groups, reflecting broader concerns about lowered expectations, reduced opportunities, and reinforced marginalisation for these students (Blatchford & Webster, 2018). However, the evidence surrounding ability grouping in secondary schools is mixed, with some studies suggesting it supports learning when appropriately matched to students' needs (Francis et al., 2019). While the students in this study were generally placed in lower sets, this may not accurately reflect the cognitive and academic diversity within the autistic population (Remy et al., 2014). These findings emphasise that placement in lower sets should be guided by individual learning profiles, not generalised assumptions about SEND that risk reinforcing deficit-based assumptions.

5.4.3.2. Model of Inclusion between the SRP and Mainstream. Although the strengths and challenges of inclusive teaching practices in mainstream classrooms have received attention in the literature (De Vroey et al., 2016; Webster & Blatchford, 2019), there is limited research on inclusive pedagogies within the hybrid model of SRPs and mainstream environments in secondary schools. Research on primary schools with SRPs, such as Frederickson et al.'s (2010) study, found that the inclusive provision was comparable across primary schools with and without an autism SRP, with the schools with SRPs adopting increased individualised strategies in response to a higher level of need. Strogilos and Ward's (2024) study of primary schools

with SRPs positioned SRPs as existing on a flexible continuum between two models: one as a service to support inclusion in the mainstream and one as a space to offer individualised support. This model aligns closely with the study's findings. Willow operated a flexible, tiered model of support, with students accessing between 10% and 100% of their lessons in Willow, receiving direct teaching from mainstream teachers in small groups. In contrast, Arc offered less flexibility on this continuum, with a higher expectation to attend mainstream lessons and the SRP designated as a space for emotional regulation and targeted interventions specified within students' EHCPs.

Interestingly, Frederickson et al. (2010) also noted that staff collaboration was less common in primary schools with an SRP, echoing issues from the schools in this study. In both school settings, TAs expressed frustration when the content or pace did not align with the students' needs. While students appreciated specific adjustments (e.g., leave lesson early cards, laptops, etc.), these alone appeared insufficient to foster inclusion unless paired with a level of flexibility and individualisation that could be accessed through support from the SRP or directly from SRP staff. Building on this, Strogilos and Ward's (2024) continuum model argues that SRPs should not be viewed solely as providers of individualised support but as a service to promote inclusive practice throughout the school. In Willow, although small group teaching facilitated differentiated, individualised learning, staff expressed concerns that this practice risked reinforcing segregation, resulting in less adaptation in the mainstream, allowing for 'structural exclusion' (Webster, 2022). In contrast, Arc promoted full mainstream access, though this did not guarantee inclusive pedagogy.

These contrasting approaches highlight that inclusion involves critically examining not only where students are placed (Florian, 2008; Norwich, 2013), but also how schools adapt pedagogy and culture to foster a genuine sense of belonging and inclusion for all learners. It remains unclear how consistently inclusive pedagogy was implemented in the mainstream across both schools, rather than being confined to the SRP and/or SRP staff. When asked about specific inclusive practices, staff in both settings struggled to identify what was unique, instead emphasising consistent relationships, offering flexibility, and the additional, direct support provided by the SRP, suggesting that both schools operated along the 'service-space' continuum described by Strogilos and Ward (2024).

5.4.4 Exosystem: Whole-School System and Structures

While the presence of an SRP within a mainstream school might suggest an inclusive ethos (Hebron & Bond, 2017; Landor & Perepa, 2017), the findings from this study indicate that inclusion was not always consistently embedded across the school community. Staff and students in both settings reported a lack of understanding and flexibility towards neurodiversity. This was evident through students' experiences of stigma and bullying for being a 'base student' in Willow and a 'white band student' in Arc, and through some mainstream teachers feeling unprepared to support students from the SRP. These challenges reflect broader barriers affecting mainstream secondary schools, such as limited training, resource pressures, and rigid policy structures (Van Steen & Wilson, 2020), where inclusive values often compete with academic accountability and pressures.

Aspects of whole-school ethos and structure, including how support staff were deployed and how resources were allocated, either supported or constrained inclusive practices and students' sense of belonging. Some staff expressed dissatisfaction with broader school structures, perceiving that the inclusion of students from the SRP was often treated as a superficial or procedural task rather than a meaningful priority, citing limited funding, staffing constraints, and reduced access to training. Several staff members in both schools called for a more cohesive, whole-school approach to autism.

5.4.4.1. Training. A recurring theme in both schools was the lack of specialist training in effectively supporting students with complex SEND among mainstream teachers. Some mainstream teachers reported feeling underprepared and lacking confidence, describing existing training as overly generic and insufficiently focused on pedagogical approaches tailored to neurodivergent learners. In contrast, staff within the SRP were perceived to possess greater expertise and access to more professional development opportunities, an advantage also highlighted in previous research (Hebron & Bond, 2017; Landor & Perepa, 2017). A particular strength of Willow was that mainstream teachers regularly taught small group lessons within the SRP, which SRP staff believed enhanced their understanding of inclusive pedagogy through 'hands-on' experience.

5.4.5 Macrosystem

Broader societal attitudes towards disability and neurodiversity significantly shape school culture and students' sense of belonging. As Lyra, an LSA in Willow, poignantly observed, *"Unless […] you have someone in your family that's SEN, people don't tend to take interest, and there is still massive*

stigma". Dominant narratives around SEND, ability, and 'normalcy' shape school culture and students' identities (Botha et al., 2022). Whether neurodiversity is embraced or marginalised within a school mirrors wider cultural values, directly impacting students from the SRPs' inclusion.

5.4.6 Temporal Dimension: Belonging as a Dynamic Process

Although not formally part of Allen & Kern's (2017) BPSEM, integrating a chronosystemic lens (how experiences and developmental processes unfold over time), drawn from Bronfenbrenner's (1986) expanded ecological model and Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework's temporal dimension, offers valuable insight into how belonging evolves. In this study, belonging was shaped over time by students' transitions, building relationships, and developing their identity. Many students had negative experiences in primary school, which impacted their early experiences in secondary school. The transition to secondary school was overwhelming; however, with time and consistent support, students developed increased confidence, relationships with staff and students, and a stronger sense of identity. Over time, teachers in both schools described students' self-perceptions evolving; some students became more comfortable in their identities, while others distanced themselves from the SRP label. The Research Group reflected that their sense of belonging evolved throughout their time at school, demonstrating belonging as a dynamic process that develops over time, closely aligning with Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework. This highlights the importance of time in shaping belonging, which is not accounted for by the BPSEM.

5.5 Theoretical Implications for Inclusion and Belonging in SRPs

5.5.1 Tensions in Inclusion: Insights from SRPs

This study provides important insights into the ongoing tensions in inclusion, particularly those encompassed by the Dilemma of Difference (Norwich, 2013). While SRPs are designed to meet the specific needs of students with SEN, their presence also identifies students as 'different'. Although not offering a complete solution, this study contributes to the debate by demonstrating that SRPs may provide a practical way to navigate the tensions.

Across both schools, SRPs were highly valued by students and staff as safe spaces that provided emotional security and individual learning support. However, this belonging was not without cost, as the dual identity that students navigated between being 'base students' and 'mainstream students' often resulted in stigma and a fragile, context-dependent sense of belonging. Interestingly, in this study, despite both SRPs operating slightly different models, e.g., Willow students receiving teaching within the SRP versus Arc students accessing all lessons in mainstream, both schools faced similar tensions. In Willow, SRP teaching risked isolating students from mainstream peers and learning opportunities, whereas in Arc, full 'inclusion' raised concerns about unmet needs in less adaptive and individualised classrooms.

Ravet's (2011) Integrative Position offers a way to understand SRPs as a middle ground between rights-based and needs-based inclusion. Similarly, Strogilos and Ward's (2024) service-space continuum highlights the varied ways SRPs operate. Willow tended more towards the 'safe space' end

(receiving small group teaching in the SRP), while Arc leaned closer to the 'inclusive service' end (TA support in mainstream lessons), yet both exhibited limitations and tensions. A key insight is that SRPs are not inherently inclusive or exclusive; their contribution to inclusion depends on how well they are embedded in the wider school system. The Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; Terzi, 2005) adds further depth by shifting the focus from placement to students' ability to achieve valued outcomes and participate meaningfully. In this study, the SRPs enabled students to convert available support, such as opportunities to interact with similar peers in safe, consistent environments, into meaningful relationships and a genuine sense of belonging. However, these conversion processes were disrupted within the mainstream environment, meaning these potentials often did not extend beyond the SRP environment to the mainstream, in line with an inclusive approach. This highlights the importance of both individual support and systemic adaptations, such as a whole-school commitment to inclusion.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that SRPs do not resolve the tensions within inclusion but offer potential pathways for navigating these complexities. Significantly, by adopting belonging as a lens, this study reframed inclusion not as a matter of placement, but as a question of how accepted, understood, and connected students feel across different spaces. SRPs can foster a strong sense of belonging; however, if not fully embraced by the wider school community, they risk creating parallel systems that limit inclusion.

5.5.2 Theoretical Contribution: Conceptualising Belonging in SRPs

Allen and Kern's (2017) BPSEM and Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework offered a valuable foundation for understanding the belonging

experiences of students attending SRPs within mainstream secondary schools. However, existing belonging models do not fully capture the frequent and rapid transitions students make daily between environments that vary significantly in relational safety, adaptability, and inclusivity. This study proposes a contextualised extension of these models, introducing the concept of 'Split-Context Belonging', to account for the specific experiences of SRP students navigating two educational environments. This is a theoretically grounded refinement that adds depth to the existing frameworks. This study expands the models in three ways:

1. **Divided Belonging:** While Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework conceptualises belonging as dynamic and context-dependent, this study demonstrates that belonging can also be divided across co-occurring settings, being simultaneously present and absent in one context. Students frequently reported differing experiences of belonging in the SRP and mainstream. Belonging was not merely fluctuating between these settings but was fragmented and conditional, changing hour by hour depending on peer interactions, relationships with staff, and environmental factors. This reveals a structural and emotional split in belonging that is not captured in existing models.
2. **Identity Negotiation as a Mediator:** Belonging is actively mediated by how students from SRPs manage their identities across various contexts. Students reported masking and withdrawing in order to navigate both environments, which carry psychological costs. This study proposes viewing identity negotiation as a mediating process that

shapes how students access, interpret, and internalise their sense of belonging.

3. **Fragmented Mesosystems and Structural Misalignment:** While Allen and Kern's (2017) BPSEM accounts for systemic influences on belonging, this study demonstrates that such structures operated inconsistently across coexisting school contexts. Students often experienced markedly different levels of access and support within different microsystems (SRP and mainstream) in the same school; for instance, accessible, identity-affirming approaches in the SRP and inaccessible, exclusionary ones in the mainstream. This within-school fragmentation reflects a misalignment at the mesosystem level. Rather than functioning as an integrated support system, the SRP and mainstream operated in parallel, producing contradictory experiences of belonging. This misaligned mesosystem adds a new dimension to understanding how structural environments shape, or undermine, inclusion for neurodivergent learners.

The 'Split-Context Belonging' conceptual lens advances belonging theory by accounting for the psychological and structural complexities of navigating two environments experienced by students attending SRPs. Previous belonging models do not fully account for the rapid, repeated transitions students undergo daily between two settings that differ significantly in relational safety, flexibility, and inclusivity. This study extends Allen et al.'s (2021) and Allen and Kern's (2017) models by introducing this lens, capturing how students in SRPs experience belonging as divided across co-existing

microsystems, mediated by identity negotiations within misaligned environments.

5.6 Contribution to Knowledge and Limitations

5.6.1 Contribution to Knowledge

This study significantly contributes to the growing body of research on the belonging and inclusion of students attending SRPs in mainstream secondary schools. Notably, it addresses the lack of literature examining SRPs in mainstream secondary schools, which are under-researched compared to primary SRPs (Laws et al., 2012; Strogilos & Ward, 2024; Warren et al., 2020). The study also offers new insights by exploring how students interpret their experiences across both the SRP and mainstream environments, with previous research typically concentrating on the specific role of the SRP. By incorporating the perspectives of mainstream teachers, the study provides a broader, systemic view, which has not been explored in research focused on secondary SRP settings.

A key contribution of this study lies in its theoretical understanding of belonging in the context of neurodivergent students attending SRPs. This study advanced understanding by applying Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework alongside Allen and Kern's (2017) BPSEM, enabling a multilayered exploration of belonging that captures the dynamic, evolving, and context-dependent nature of students' experiences. Importantly, this study extends these models by introducing 'Split-Context Belonging', a conceptual lens that more accurately reflects the lived experiences of students attending SRPs. This

highlights that belonging is not only dynamic but also divided across coexisting settings (SRP and mainstream). This lens illustrates that belonging is mediated by identity negotiation, as students regularly shift between 'SRP' and 'mainstream' identities multiple times a day. This has a significant emotional and cognitive burden, which adds new depth to theories of belonging. While prior models acknowledge systemic and individual influences on belonging, this study highlights the challenges of navigating a split sense of belonging within misaligned school environments. This conceptual refinement may also have relevance beyond SRPs; for example, in understanding how autistic individuals experience belonging when transitioning between other settings, such as home and public spaces. Future research could explore how Split-Context Belonging operates in other dual-context environments or experiences.

A key contribution of this research is its focus on the voices of young people with neurodiversity and SEND, specifically autistic students, who have been historically underrepresented in research. By foregrounding the lived experiences of the students themselves, this study challenges the dominance of parental and teacher perspectives found in SRP research (e.g., Hebron & Bond, 2017; Landor & Perepa, 2017).

This study also contributes to inclusion debates by providing nuanced insights into how SRPs both support and complicate the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream secondary schools. By examining two SRP models with slightly different approaches to mainstream inclusion, the study finds that inclusion is not achieved simply through placement in the SRP or mainstream but requires ongoing negotiation between individual needs and systemic structures. Drawing on frameworks such as Ravet’s (2011) Integrative Position

and the Capability Approach (Terzi, 2005), the research argues that the effectiveness of SRPs depends on how well they and neurodiversity are embraced and embedded within the broader school culture.

5.6.1.1. Methodology. This study contributes to research on employing participatory and inclusive methodologies, particularly with autistic young people. The Research Group served as experts by experience, ensuring that research tools, language, and methods were accessible for autistic students and representative of their experiences. This resulted in meaningful adaptations to research tools, enhancing the authenticity and inclusivity of data collection. This approach aligns with the movement towards emphasising pupil voice in research, as well as attempting to address historical power imbalances in autism research by recognising autistic young people as experts in their own experiences (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019).

Another strength lies in the qualitative case study approach, which provided a deep and contextualised understanding of students' experiences in both the SRP and mainstream settings. By triangulating data from students, SRP staff, mainstream staff, and observation data, the study presented a more holistic and credible account of belonging experiences. The diversity of the sample, comprising students of various genders, ethnic backgrounds, and ages, is also a significant strength. Much previous research has concentrated narrowly on one demographic, such as autistic girls in SRPs (Halsall et al., 2021). In contrast, this study provides a broader and more representative view of SRP experiences.

5.6.2 Limitations

The research concentrated solely on students' experiences of belonging within the school context. Belonging is a complex and dynamic construct that goes beyond school experiences, and examining belonging across students' homes and communities may provide a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences.

Additionally, while efforts were made to explore belonging in an inclusive and participatory manner, challenges arose in conceptualising and interpreting the construct. Belonging can be difficult to define and articulate, particularly for neurodivergent students. Despite employing visual supports and inclusive tools, it is possible that some students struggled to fully express their experiences or that their meanings were unintentionally influenced by my interpretations.

The involvement of the Research Group was a strength of the study; however, this was limited to sixth form students from Willow due to recruitment challenges. Additionally, greater involvement of the Research Group across different stages of the research process, such as during the analysis or for feedback on themes, would have enhanced the participatory ethos of the study.

Finally, as a non-autistic researcher, I remain mindful of the double empathy problem (Milton, 2012) and the impact this may have had on my interpretations. While I engaged in reflexive practice, involved the Research Group, and employed Cascio et al.'s (2020) person-oriented research ethic framework (Section 3.5.1.2.), it is important to acknowledge how my positionality may have influenced the research and interpretation of autistic students' perspectives.

5.7 Future Research

This study has highlighted several avenues for future research. One area involves exploring experiences of belonging across different SRP types, such as those supporting students with hearing impairments or physical disabilities. This would aid in determining whether the dual-identity tensions observed in this study are shared across SRPs or unique to specific neurodevelopmental profiles.

Additionally, comparing the experiences of autistic students attending SRPs with autistic students in the mainstream, from the same school could illuminate the distinct value of the SRP, highlight specific school-wide factors that support or hinder inclusion, and demonstrate how mainstream environments might better emulate these practices. As transitions have emerged as an important period impacting students' sense of belonging, future research could employ a longitudinal design to investigate the primary to secondary transition, emphasising how belonging could be supported during this time.

Future research could examine how belonging is shaped by intersecting identities, especially for autistic students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. While this study included participants from diverse backgrounds, it did not explicitly examine how these factors may have influenced belonging, potentially overlooking significant intersectional factors that affect students' experiences and inclusion.

Finally, further investigation into effective collaboration practices and approaches between SRP and mainstream staff is necessary to better understand how cohesion can be achieved between both the mainstream and SRP environments in support of more effective inclusive practices.

5.8 Implications for Schools, EPs and Policy

5.8.1 Schools

As this research employed a case-study approach, its findings are particularly relevant to the two SRPs involved. However, given the level of detail provided about the two settings, there may be implications for schools with SRPs in a similar context. Additionally, the findings may have broader implications for mainstream schools implementing inclusive strategies for students with neurodiversity and SEND.

5.8.1.1. Creating Emotionally Safe and Neurodiversity-Affirming Spaces. Students described belonging as deeply connected to environments where they felt emotionally secure and understood. SRPs fostered this sense of safety, particularly when students could express their identity without fear of judgement. This underscores the significance of neurodiversity-affirming spaces in schools, where students can share experiences with similar peers and feel less pressure to mask, thus nurturing a sense of belonging.

5.8.1.2. Promote Meaningful Relationships Across Settings. A sense of belonging was consistently linked to genuine, trusting relationships with both staff and peers. While SRP environments facilitated friendships among SRP students, they reported barriers to social connections in the mainstream.

Schools can create structured opportunities for SRP and mainstream students to interact (e.g,. shared projects or clubs) and foster meaningful student-teacher relationships through authentic connections.

5.8.1.3. Strengthen Coherence Between SRP and Mainstream.

Students felt a fragmented sense of belonging when expectations, relationships, or values differed significantly between the SRP and mainstream settings. Consistency in support and understanding across these environments is key. Schools can allocate time for collaboration between SRP and mainstream staff (e.g., co-planning and shared training) and utilise SRPs as ‘outreach support’ for inclusive practice, sharing expertise, modelling strategies, and influencing the broader school culture. Students from the SRP could participate in raising awareness by acting as ‘Autism Advocates’ or ‘Neurodiversity Ambassadors’ by running events, workshops, or awareness campaigns. Importantly, inclusion should not be confined to SRPs; a whole-school commitment to neurodiversity-affirming values is important to ensure consistency and shared responsibility for fostering belonging across both environments.

5.8.2 EPs

This study offers important implications for EPs, particularly in their systemic work with schools in promoting inclusive practice through the development of robust school systems that support the belonging of all children and young people with SEND (Birch et al., 2023). The findings around students' differing experiences of belonging across the SRP and mainstream settings due to mesosystem misalignment underline the need for more cohesive, whole-school approaches to inclusion. EPs, with their position at the intersection of

individual and systems-level work, are uniquely placed to support and help schools to strengthen relationships across systems and enhance cohesion through consultation, ecological mapping, staff development, reflective practice, and policy influence.

5.8.2.1. Addressing Systemic Tensions in Inclusion. EPs are well-positioned to help schools reflect on and navigate the persistent tensions in inclusion policy and practice (Norwich, 2008a), particularly the tension between supporting needs through specialist provision and ensuring access, participation, and membership in the wider school community. This is especially important given the risk, as demonstrated in this study, that SRPs may unintentionally reinforce separation while aiming to provide support. A key finding was the lack of cohesion between the SRPs and wider school systems, which created identity tension and divided experiences of belonging for students.

EPs can enhance coherence between SRP and mainstream settings and help mainstream schools in general in navigating tensions in inclusion through facilitating systems-level consultation with school senior leaders, including SENCos and SRP leads. This can support schools to examine and align their inclusive ethos with practice, clarify the process and goals of SRP placements, critically review the language used around inclusion and difference, develop strategies that support students' emotional, social, and relational needs, and address ambiguity and responsibility in roles across departments, e.g., mainstream and SRP. EPs have knowledge of systemic models of school functioning, evidence-informed approaches to inclusive practice, and organisational change (Farrell, 2006; Morgan, 2016). This

specialist knowledge equips EPs to facilitate reflective conversations, and use ecological mapping to support schools in visualising how students' experiences are shaped by their school systems, such as policy, peer attitudes, staff knowledge, and ethos (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This can help schools identify any misalignments in communication, role clarity, and decision-making structures between SRP and mainstream settings and inform collaborative planning that fosters greater alignment between SRP and mainstream systems. EPs can draw on further psychological tools and approaches to support systemic consultation and strategic planning, such as PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope), a person-centred, futures-oriented approach that facilitates collaborative goal setting and action planning (Pearpoint et al., 1993).

5.8.2.2. Staff Development. While many staff members were committed to inclusive values, there was variation in their confidence, training, and clarity around their roles. Mainstream teachers often felt underprepared to meet the needs of students from the SRP, while SRP staff expressed concern about how inclusion was enacted across the school. Given the clear need for professional development and cultural change in schools around inclusion and neurodiversity, EPs can support staff knowledge and confidence through training. EPs can work with schools to deliver joint professional learning opportunities, including training on inclusive pedagogy for students with SEND, to foster shared ownership of inclusion across all school systems. Additionally, EPs can respond to the need for further staff development by supporting whole-school capacity building through models that encourage reflective inquiry and joint problem-solving among all staff members. For example, EPs can facilitate

joint reflective spaces for SRP and mainstream staff, including group consultation and supervision, which allows staff to explore such tensions, including their beliefs, anxieties, and assumptions around SEND and inclusion in a supported and non-judgmental context (Wagner, 2000). Such reflective practice sessions could support SRP and mainstream staff to explore inclusion challenges and develop shared strategies to promote a collective responsibility for the inclusion of students with SEND.

Linked to this, EPs can draw on implementation frameworks such as Guskey's (2002) model of teacher change that suggests that school staff are more likely to embrace inclusive practices and commit to change when they observe a positive impact on students with SEND. This can involve helping staff identify and monitor the impact of strategies on student outcomes, facilitating structured reflection on progress, sharing of success stories, student feedback on effective strategies, making evidence of change visible through data tracking and setting clear success criteria based on whole-school frameworks like the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002), in addition to belonging frameworks such as the BPSEM (Allen & Kern, 2017) as core evaluative lenses. Additionally, as part of this role, EPs can work with senior leaders to identify and address organisational barriers to inclusion, such as lack of time and resources, leadership misalignment, role ambiguity, and varying levels of staff readiness when planning and implementing to support staged and sustainable change. EPs can support school leaders to understand the process of creating organisational change by drawing on models such as Kotter's (1996) eight-step model of change, which emphasises the importance of developing and communicating a shared vision, enabling leadership, and

embedding change into school culture. Additionally, EPs can draw on solution-focused techniques such as Appreciative Inquiry approaches that focus on identifying and amplifying existing strengths to foster motivation and shared ownership of developing inclusion by 'working on what works' (Cooperrider et al., 1995). For example, in this study, the SRP was found to foster a strong sense of belonging among students. EPs can support schools in recognising these strengths and building on them to further enhance inclusive practices.

5.8.2.3. Positioning Belonging as a Psychological Lens for Inclusion.

EPs are well placed to support schools in understanding belonging as a psychological lens through which to view and achieve inclusion, recognising that a strong sense of belonging is linked to students' engagement, learning, wellbeing, and academic outcomes (Allen et al., 2021). Building on this study's findings around fragmented belonging and dual identities, EPs can help schools reflect on how current practices either support or undermine student belonging, particularly for those attending SRPs. This includes encouraging schools to explicitly embed belonging within inclusion policies by developing practices that are psychologically informed and grounded in young people's lived experiences, ensuring that support goes beyond academic adjustments to also foster students' sense of belonging and identity. EPs can work collaboratively with schools to gather and interpret data on belonging using indicators of belonging, such as using participatory methods to gather the views of students with SEND or standardised tools like the PSSMS, to track belonging and evaluate inclusive practice over time. In doing so, EPs not only strengthen systemic understanding of belonging but also help schools develop more relational, inclusive, and identity-affirming environments, empowering

students as they prepare for transitions to further education, employment, and adult life.

5.8.2.4. EP Influence at the LA and Policy Level. EPs working at a strategic level within LAs hold a critical role in shaping inclusive provision beyond the individual school level. Drawing on insights from this study, EPs can support the planning, commissioning, and evaluation of SRPs to ensure they are not isolated provisions but embedded within a whole-school and whole-system approach to inclusion. EPs can inform commissioning processes to ensure SRPs are developed with clear frameworks that prioritise inclusion, belonging, and identity development. They can advise on the design and evaluation of SRPs by ensuring that inclusion is not only about access to specialist support but also about coherence between systems and shared ethos and accountability between SRPs and mainstream staff. They can advocate for student experience indicators, such as belonging and participation, to be used alongside traditional outcome measures like attendance or attainment. Additionally, EPs can ensure that the relational and emotional functions of SRPs, as safe spaces that support authenticity and connection, are recognised in local SEND strategies and school improvement plans. In doing so, EPs can influence policy and provision to align more closely with inclusive principles based on belonging and to promote better outcomes for all students with SEND.

5.9 Conclusion

Guided by Allen et al.'s (2021) Integrative Framework and Allen and Kern's (2017) BPSEM, this study explored students' experiences of belonging within SRPs and mainstream settings, demonstrating how multiple interacting layers, from individual identity to whole-school ethos, collectively shape belonging. A key insight reveals the divided and shifting nature of belonging across SRP and mainstream contexts. Students navigate the complexities between two worlds: the SRP, where trusted relationships and tailored support foster emotional safety and authenticity, and the mainstream environment, characterised by stigma, inflexibility, and lower academic expectations that often disrupt belonging. This duality highlights the psychological costs of moving between two social worlds and maintaining two conflicting identities. Importantly, this study contributes a theoretical refinement by introducing the Split-Context Belonging conceptual lens of belonging as divided, conditional and identity-mediated across parallel school settings.

The findings emphasise the potential of SRPs to scaffold belonging throughout the school environment, provided they are supported by a school-wide culture that embraces neurodiversity. Raising awareness of neurodiversity and the role of the SRP can help reduce the tensions in belonging experiences. In doing so, SRPs can become not only spaces for support but key contributors to a reimagined, more inclusive model of education.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Search Strategy

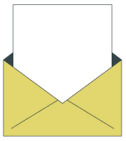
Literature was identified through a scoping review using UCL Explore between December 2023 and March 2025. This involved searches across the following databases: PsychINFO, Psychology Database (ProQuest), British Education Index and ERIC (EBSCO). The search terms included a combination of multiple terms based on initial exploration of the research topic including: “inclusion”, “inclusive”, “inclusive education”, “exclusion”, “belonging”, “sense of belonging”, “lived experience”, “students”, “pupils”, “school”, “mainstream” “specialist”, “resource provision”, “specially resourced provision”, “specialist resourced provision”, “resource base”, “SEN unit”, “special school”, “mainstream”, “secondary school”, “special educational needs”, “special needs”, “SEN”, “SEND”, “autism”, “autistic”, “ASC”, “ASD”, “neurodivergent”, “social communication”. The review included journal articles, books, book chapters, government publications and reports. This review excluded literature and resources that were non-peer reviewed, in languages other than English and dated before 2000 to allow for examination of the implementation of inclusion over time, but with relevance to current debates and practice. The literature review focused primarily on studies conducted in the UK although some international literature was also referred to compare and critique approaches to inclusive education particularly within growing discourse around the use of SRPs (Lindsay, 2007; Shevlin & Banks, 2021).

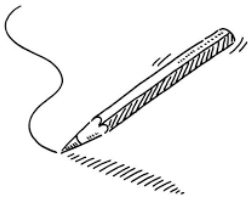
Appendix B: Reflexive Diary Excerpt

Reflexive diary: Arc, Northgate School Student interview and mainstream lesson & SRP observation (Tanya) 22.11.24	Tanya was the second student I interviewed after John. I'm initially struck by the differences in both interviews in terms of they each shared. Tanya appeared much less concerned with relationships with other students. Both from the observations and in interview, I got the emerging sense that Tanya is was not as concerned or interested in friendships and relationships with peers. She did speak about relationships with teachers and spoke about some teachers that she likes. On reflecting on Tanya's needs in line with her autism I considered the impact of this. I am wondering how belonging looks for students with autism and what I think belonging is (from a neurotypical perspective) might not be what students with autism think belonging is. For example, during my observation, I reflected on how it may look like Tanya did not belong as she was not interacting with peers, and therefore she did not appear 'included'. However, I thought that if Tanya is not interested in such interaction with other students, and it is actually something she might find difficult or anxiety-provoking in line with her needs, then this perhaps does not necessarily mean that she doesn't belong. From this, I'm wondering about the ideas of inclusion versus belonging but also what it means to belong. It might be that belonging is an individual interpretation, and it is based on things that are unique and characteristic of that person that supports their belonging. For example, Tanya seems to really like Art so she spoke really highly of her art teacher when speaking about relationships and belonging. Tanya did speak about feeling different but appeared to struggle to articulate some of this and often said she wasn't really sure why. This made me reflect that this was difficult or uncomfortable for Tanya to speak about. Overall, I felt Tanya shared a lot in her interview that helped me reflect on thinking about belonging from an autistic lens. A key reflection for me as a non-autistic person is interpreting autistic students views particularly about a relational and personal concept like belonging. This is something I need to continue to constantly consider and reflect on when looking at the data and as I complete further interviews.

Appendix C: Student Information Sheet and Consent Form

Student Information Sheet for Research Project on Resource Provisions

	Hello! My name is Lisa, and I am a researcher studying at the Institute of Education, University College London. I am training to become an Educational Psychologist. In this job I work with young people in schools to help them have positive experiences.
	**<u>Why am I contacting you?</u>** I am conducting a Research Project to try and find out how young people like you feel about school. I am interested to hear about your experiences and views of school. I would like to know more about what you think about attending the Resource Provision and your mainstream classes.
	**<u>What are the aims of the Research?</u>** I want to know more about how being in the Resource Provision impacts on your belonging and inclusion at school. Understanding your views about this can help adults like me and your teachers better support and help students to have positive experiences at school.
	I would like to invite you to take part in my project. If you would like to participate, this is what will happen:
	**1. Lesson visits** I would like to come to your school and visit some of your lessons in the mainstream, Resource Provision and at break time. I will watch what happens in your lessons so that I

	can learn more about what happens in your day-to-day life at school. I may ask you some questions about your lessons during and after.
	**2. Meet with me** I would also like to ask you a few questions about how what you think about school and your experiences in the Resource Provision and in your mainstream lessons. I will audio record what we talk about to type this up afterwards with a fake name. I will then delete audio-recording.
	When we meet, we will complete some activities to help you tell me about your school including sorting pictures related to school activities, and a questionnaire. This will last for 30 to 45 minutes.
	**<u>What will happen if I take part in the Project?</u>** If you agree to take part, we will do these activities. You will know in advance which day I will be visiting. I will audio record what we talk about and write some notes from what I see when visiting your lessons. I will think about what you have told me and wat I have seen and write up a report. It is OK to change your mind at any time if you would like.
	I will not use your real name or the name of your school when I write the project in the report. If you tell me something which I feel may put you or someone else in danger, I will need to tell someone who can help.

	I will store your information safely until the research project is completed.
	Your parent or carer will also be asked for their permission for you to take part in this project.
	Would you like to take part in the project? Please tick: Yes ☐ No ☐ If you agree to take part, please sign below: Your name:..... Date:.....
	If you have any questions about this project, please ask your parent or the Head of the Resource Provision at your school and they can contact me. Thank you!

Appendix D: Parent/Carers Information Sheet and Consent Form

Institute of Education

UCL

Exploring the Inclusion of Students Attending Specially Resourced Provisions in Mainstream Secondary Schools.

Dear Parents and Guardians,

I am writing to invite your child to participate in my research project examining students' sense of belonging and inclusion in mainstream secondary schools. This information sheet outlines my research project. Before deciding whether you would like your child to take part, please read this information sheet to understand the purpose of the research and what participation in the study will involve. If anything is unclear or if you require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at Lisa.Sheridan.22@ucl.ac.uk.

After reading this information sheet, if you are willing to give consent for your child's participation, you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm agreement. Participation in this research is not compulsory. If you choose for your child not to take part, this will not have an impact on their education at the school.

Who is conducting this project?
This study is being conducted by Lisa Sheridan. I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at [REDACTED] Psychology Service. I am currently completing my Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the Institute of Education, University College London. I will be carrying out this research project as part of my course requirements.

What I aim to do:
This study aims to explore the role of Specially Resourced Provisions in facilitating the inclusion and belonging of students with SEN. I want to find out:

- How do students who attend the Specially Resourced Provision feel they are included and their sense of belonging in their school?
- How do teachers support the inclusion of students who attend the Specially Resourced Provision?

What will happen if you agree to your child's involvement:

1. *Interview:*

With your agreement, you child will be asked to meet with me, with their support staff if preferred, to talk about their experiences of school. The interview questions will cover themes such as likes and dislikes at school, what they find helpful at school, friendships, relationships with staff. To support your child's participation, they will take part in a visual card sorting task, similar to 'Talking Mats', that will facilitate the conversation. In response to the question 'what helps you feel like you belong in

school?' the students will sort the visuals into 'yes', 'sometimes' and 'no' using a visual red, amber, green traffic light system.
To minimise any distress in the interviews, I will speak with the young people's teachers about how the individual might need questions and activities mediated, e.g., breaking down questions, visuals, fidget toys, movement breaks, adult present in room. The interviews will last between 30 to 45 minutes and will take place in familiar setting within the Specially Resourced Provision.

2. *Observations:*

With your agreement, your child will be asked to participate in 2 lesson observations: one in the mainstream classroom, and one in the Resourced Provision. The aim of the observations are to understand the experiences of students in the context of the day-to-day life of the school. It is not the role of the researcher to make any judgements or evaluations about the work of teachers or support staff involved in the study. During and after the observation, I may ask your child some questions about their experience (e.g., what they were doing) to clarify information and ensure I have accurately captured their experience.

3. *Questionnaire:*

With your agreement, your child will be asked to complete an adapted version of the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale questionnaire to gain further insight into their sense of belonging at school. This is a scale used to measure students' belonging at school with an emphasis on social relations, identifying social and contextual influences on belonging. The adapted version of the questionnaire I will use presents each statement/question one at a time to the student, and they answer each question in relation to the Resourced Provision and mainstream classes. This will take between 5 to 10 minutes.

Benefits of Participation:
Your child's participation will contribute to better understanding student's view of inclusion and belonging and the factors that might impact this. There is currently limited research in the UK on how Specially Resourced Provisions support the inclusion for young people with SEN in secondary schools. The research aims to shed some light on how your child's school goes about trying to achieve this. Understanding what is working and what might need to be improved upon will help ensure best practice and identify possible next steps.

Confidentiality:
Individual results will not be disclosed. The information we collect regarding your child's age, year group and SEN, is kept strictly confidential. All data gathered in the study will be anonymised and I will use pseudonyms to replace any identifying information of participants. The data will not be accessible to anyone but the researcher and their supervisors. The individual interviews will be audio recorded and will be retained and stored on an encrypted cloud storage. Once the research project has been completed, anonymised data will be stored in accordance with the University's Data Protection Policy before it is securely disposed of as outlined in the Data Protection Act (2018).

What should I do next?
If you and your child would like to take part, please fill in the consent form and return it to the school. If you have any questions, please email me at Lisa.Sheridan.22@ucl.ac.uk
Thank you for taking the time to read through this information sheet and consider my research proposal.

Institute of Education

UCL

Exploring the Inclusion of Students Attending Specially Resourced Provisions in Mainstream Secondary Schools

Parent's Consent Form

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 via the contact details below:

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

2) I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. ☐

3) I agree for my child to be part of this study, and that their data will be kept secure and destroyed at the end of three years. I know that all data will be kept under the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). ☐

Name:……

Signature: …… Date: ……

Name of researcher: Lisa Sheridan……

Signature: …… Date: ……

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The 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.

This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information from research studies can be found in our 'general' privacy notice for participants in research studies here.

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices. The lawful basis that will be used to process any personal details: 'Public task' for personal data and 'Research purposes' for special category data.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.

Appendix E: Teacher Information Sheet and Consent Form

Institute of Education

UCL

Information for Teaching and Support Staff

Exploring the Inclusion of Students Attending Specially Resourced Provisions in Mainstream Secondary Schools

My name is Lisa Sheridan, and I would like to invite you and you school to take part in my research project. I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at [REDACTED] Psychology Service, and I am currently completing my Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the Institute of Education, University College London. I will be carrying out this research project as part of my course requirements.

This information sheet outlines my research project. Before deciding whether you would like to take part, please read this information sheet to understand why the study is being conducted and what participation in tis study entails. If anything is unclear, or if you need any further information, do not hesitate to contact me at Lisa.Sheridan.22@ucl.ac.uk.

After reading this information sheet, if you are willing give consent for your participation, you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm agreement. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time.

What I aim to do:

This study aims to explore the role of Specially Resourced Provisions in facilitating the inclusion and belonging of students with SEN. I want to find out:

- How do students who attend the Specially Resourced Provision feel they are included and their sense of belonging in their school?
- How do teachers support the inclusion of students who attend the Specially Resourced Provision?

To answer these questions, I hope to meet with students from the Specially Resourced Provision and ask questions about their school experiences. I also hope to speak to subject teachers of the students and support staff from the Specially Resourced Provision to explore their views on inclusion of students from the Specially Resourced Provision. I also hope to carry out observations of the students in their mainstream lessons and within the Resourced Provision to provide further information on the students' inclusion within these contexts.

What participation in the research will involve:

Individual Interviews

With your agreement, you will be asked to meet with me to discuss your views on the inclusion and belonging of students who access the Specially Resourced Provision.

Themes that the interview will cover are your views on the inclusion of students who attend the Resourced Provision, how the school supports the inclusion of students with SEND, and relationships with students. The interviews will last approximately 30-45 minutes.

What participation in the research will involve for the students:

1. **Observations:** As described above, I would then like to invite 4 other students attending the Resourced Provision to take part in the main phase of the study. I will observe each of the 4 students within a mainstream lesson, and within the Resourced Provision. The aim of the observations are to understand the experiences of students in the context of the day-to-day life of the school.

2. **Interviews with Students:** The 4 students taking part in the observations will be invited to meet with me, with a member of support staff if preferred, to talk about their experiences of school. The interview questions will cover themes such as likes and dislikes at school, what they find helpful at school, friendships, relationships with staff.
    a. ***Visual sorting activity*** - To support students in discussing their experiences at school, they will take part in a visual card sorting task, similar to 'Talking Mats', that will facilitate the conversation. In response to the question 'what helps you feel like you belong in school?' the students will sort the visuals into 'yes', 'sometimes' and 'no' using a visual red, amber, green traffic light system.
    b. ***Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale*** - The students will also be asked to complete an adapted version of the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale questionnaire to gain further insight into the students' sense of belonging at school. This is a scale used to measure students' belonging at school with an emphasis on social relations identifying social and contextual influences on students' belonging. The adapted version of the questionnaire I will use is presenting each statement/question one at a time to the student, and the student answers each question in relation to the Resourced Provision and mainstream classes. This will take between 5 to 10 minutes.

    To minimise any distress in the interviews, I will speak with the young people's teachers/support staff about how the individual might need questions and activities mediated, e.g., breaking down questions, visuals, fidget toys, movement breaks, adult present in room. The interviews will last between 30 to 45 minutes and will take place in familiar setting within the Specially Resourced Provision.

Benefits of participation:

Your participation will contribute to a better understanding children's and teacher's views of inclusion and some of the factors that might impact this. There is currently limited research in the UK of how Specially Resourced Provisions support the facilitation of inclusion for young people with SEN in secondary schools. The research

aims to shed some light into how your setting goes about trying to achieve this. Understanding what is working and what might need to be improved upon will help ensure best practice and identify possible next steps. At the completion of the study, I will present the findings of the study to your school and offer training on school belonging to support the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools.

Confidentiality:
All data gathered in the study will be anonymised and I will use pseudonyms to replace any identifying information of participants. The data will not be accessible to anyone but the researcher and their supervisor. The individual interviews will be audio recorded and will be retained and stored on an encrypted cloud storage. Once the research project has been completed, anonymised data will be stored in accordance with the University's Data Protection Policy before it is securely disposed of as outlined in the Data Protection Act (2018).

Contact Information:
Thank you for taking the time to read through this information sheet and consider my research proposal.
If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to email the researcher at Lisa.Sheridan.22@ucl.ac.uk.

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The 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.

This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information from research studies can be found in our 'general' privacy notice for participants in research studies here.

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices. The lawful basis that will be used to process any personal details: 'Public task' for personal data and 'Research purposes' for special category data.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.

Institute of Education

UCL

Exploring the Inclusion of Students Attending Specially Resourced Provisions in Mainstream Secondary Schools.

Teaching and Support Staff's Consent Form

If you are happy to participate in this study, please complete this consent form by ticking each item, as appropriate, and return to the research team via the contact details below:

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

2) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw 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 interview at any point. ☐

4) I agree for the interview to be audio recorded, and that recordings will be kept secure and destroyed at the end of three years. I know that all data will be kept under the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). ☐

5) I agree that small quotes may be used in reports (these will be anonymised). ☐

Name:……
.

Signature: …… Date: ……..

Name of researcher: Lisa Sheridan

Signature: …… Date: ……..

Appendix F: Observation Schedule

The 3 C's approach: Context, Content, and Concepts (Fetters and Rubinstein, 2019)

Observation Schedule

From Fetter and Rubinstein (2019) three C's approach [Context, Content and Concepts]

Project title: Exploring the Role of Belonging in the Inclusion of Students Attending Specially Resourced Provisions in Mainstream Secondary Schools	
Document type: Unstructured Field Observations	
Observer: LS	
Date:	**Time:**
Observation Session Number:	
Location: (SRP/Mainstream class)	
Research Questions: 1. How do students attending an SRP in a mainstream secondary school experience belonging? 2. How do students attending an SRP experience belonging within the SRP and mainstream settings? 3. What facilitates belonging for students attending an SRP in mainstream secondary schools?	
Participant:	
Context *(researcher observations about factors or circumstances under which observation is taking place, e.g. which setting, no of student, teachers, detailed description of what the space is like)*	
Content *(Who/what is being observed? What actions/events are occurring? How do the individuals being observed interact? What is the timing/sequence of events? Quotes from interactions/ responses to researcher's questions)*	

Concepts *(Preliminary ideas, observations, what have I learned that I didn't know before? Potential implications of what I've observed. New questions arising from observation. Reflect on observations and compare theory with practice)*

Description of 3 C's approach

Category	Definition	Focus
Context	- The setting for the observations (the circumstances under which an observation occurred) - Researcher observations about factors or circumstances under which observation is taking place - Including information that might directly or indirectly influence data collection processes or affect the researcher and/or participants - Considering aspects that might influence students' experiences of belonging and inclusion in both the SRP and mainstream lessons -Context can act as a reminder of the researcher's purpose in using observations	• Who? • Where? (SRP/mainstream) • How many students? • Who is the target student next to/near? • Where is the target student positioned/sitting? • How many adults? • Where are the adults sitting/spending time? • Are the adults accessible? • Setting arrangements/positioning (small groups, in 2's, in rows) • Description of space • Map of layout/classroom organisation • Other environmental factors • Displays/signs/rules
Content	- What happens during the observation period - Focus on observable behaviours, interactions, and affect that could reveal how students experience belonging and inclusion - The research question and the project's theoretical orientation (the research questions, and the first C, context, described previously) are paramount here in guiding the observations	• What is the target student doing? (Participating actively or withdrawn?) • What events/activities are happening? • Who is involved? • What do you hear/see? • How is the target student interacting? Engaging actively, passively or avoiding interaction? • Seeking interactions with peers? Which peers? • Who are they interacting with? • Is the student isolated/part of a group? • How is their engagement? • Notable interactions, behaviours or affect/emotions? • Do they appear comfortable, confident, or anxious?

		• Confidence, motivation? • Any expressions of inclusion or belonging? (through actions, words, or affect) • What are the staff doing? • What teaching practices/approach are staff using to facilitate inclusion? • Who are the staff interacting with? • Any noticeable helpful behaviours/actions? • Do staff intervene to facilitate social interactions? Which staff? • Are staff encouraging independence or collaboration? • How are the other students interacting? • What is the timing/sequence of events? • Quotes from interactions that may be linked to/indicate belonging • Quotes in response to researcher's questions
Concepts	- Theoretical insights emerging - Reflections of observations in relation to what I have observed previously, prior literature and theories and my research questions - Linking observations to theoretical insights on belonging & inclusion and reflect on how observations inform research questions	• What have I learned that I did not know before? • How does the observation relate to prior observations? • Any patterns or themes identified? • What are some potential implications of my observations? • Any new questions arising from observation? • What do the observations suggest/reveal about belonging and inclusion? • Are certain factors (environment, social interactions, or teaching practices) consistently helping or hindering students' sense of belonging? • Are there common themes emerging across SRP and mainstream contexts?

		• Are there difference emerging across the different settings? E.g., in peer interactions, level of engagement, etc. • Does the observation support any theories or literature on belonging/inclusion?

Appendix G: Student Interview Schedule

Introducing/Setting up the Interview

- Hello [STUDENT], Thank you for meeting with me today.
- Consent: I received your consent form [have spare on as visual reminder], thank you for completing this. As a reminder I am conducting a Research Project to try and find out how young people like you feel about school and I am interested to hear about your experiences and views of school. I would like to know more about what you think about attending [name of SRP] and your mainstream classes. I will record the interview using this Dictaphone [show]. Like in the consent form, I will not use your real name or the name of your school when I write the project in the report. Instead, I will use a fake name that you can chose…
  Pseudonym_____
  Would you still like to take part?
- Supporting adult: Would you prefer if there was an LSA in the room during your interview or would you like it to just be us two?
- Right to withdraw: You can stop the interview at any time if you need to and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. You can do this by telling me you would like to stop or holding or pointing to this 'Stop' card here. You can do this if you need a break or if you would like to end the interview.
- Are you ready to start?

1. It would be good to start by **getting to know you**. Can you tell me about yourself?
   Probes:
   a. Year group
   b. What do you like to do? Interests/hobbies?
   c. What school do you go to? How long have you been in this school?
   d. What school did you go to before this school? What was it like? How did you feeling in this school?

2. I would like to hear more about **this school**. What is it like?
   Probes:
   a. Can you tell me about a typical day at school?
   b. How do you feel about attending this school? How do you feel coming to school/at school?
   c. What are the best parts of school? What do you like best?
      i. Why?
   d. Are there any parts of school that you don't like?
      i. What could help this/make this better?
   e. How does this school compare to the other school/primary school you went to?

i. Was it the same or different? Why/how?

3. I would like to hear more about **your lessons and day at school**…
   Probes:
   a. What lessons do you enjoy? Why?
   b. Where do you have your lessons? (mainstream/SRP)
   c. Do you get any support with your learning?
      i. If yes, what kind of support? Is this helpful? Why?
      ii. Who supports you at school?
         1. TA?
   d. What else helps you at school? What helps you the most at school?
   e. Can you tell me about breaktime and lunch/time?
      i. What do you do at breaktime and lunchtime?
      ii. Where do you spend breaktime/lunchtime?

4. I would like to hear more about **the people in your school**. Can you tell me about the people in your school?
   Probes:
   a. Who do you spend time with at school?
   b. Can you tell me about the other students?
      i. What activities do you do with the other students?
      ii. What about the students who are / are not part of the SRP?
   c. Can you tell me about you friends at school?
      i. What do you like to do together?
      ii. Who do you socialise with?
   d. Can you tell me about your teachers? (SRP/mainstream?)
      i. How do your teachers support you?
         1. Which teachers?
   e. Who helps you at school/in your lessons?

5. I would like to hear more about the **SRP**. Can you tell me about the SRP?
   Probes:
   a. What do you do in the SRP?
   b. What helps you in the SRP?
      i. Academic/learning
      ii. Social and emotionally
   c. What is it like moving between the SRP and other classes?
      i. What is good/bad about this?
   d. What is the difference between the SRP and other classes?
      i. Where do you prefer to spend your time? (learning/socially). Why?
   e. How do you feel about being a part of the SRP?
   f. What's the best thing about being part of the SRP?

6. Finally, I would like to ask you some questions about **belonging** at school.
   a. Where do you feel happiest/safest at school?

    i. Why? What are you doing? Are other people with you?

b. Do you feel that you belong at school?
    ii. Where do you feel that you belong?

b. Who do you feel like you belong with when you are at school?
    i. Who do you feel happiest/safest/comfortable with in school? Why? What are they doing?

c. What helps you feel like you belong at school?

d. Is there people you could talk to if there was something that was bothering you in school? Who?

Appendix H: Adapted Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale

1) I feel like a part of my school			
SRP [Willow/Arc]	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
2) People at my school notice when I am good at something			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
3) It is hard for people like me to be accepted in the…			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
4) Other students in my school take my opinions seriously			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
5) Most teachers at my school are interested in me			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
6) Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong in my school			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None

7) There is at least one teacher or adult I can talk to in my school if I have a problem			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
8) People at my school are friendly to me			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
9) Teachers here are not interested in people like me			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
10) I am included in lots of activities at my school			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
11) I am treated with as much respect as other students in my school			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
12) I feel very different from most other students at my school			

SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
13) I can really be myself at my school			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
14) Teachers at my school respect me			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
15) People at my school know that I can do good work			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
16) I wish I were in a different school			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
17) I feel proud to belong to the…			
SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None
18) Other students at my school like me the way that I am			

SRP	Mainstream	Both – SRP & Mainstream	None

1) I feel like a part of my school.
2) People at my school notice when I am good at something.
3) It is hard for people like me to be accepted in the…
4) Other students in my school take my opinions seriously.
5) Most teachers at my school are interested in me.
6) Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong in my school.
7) There is at least one teacher or adult I can talk to in my school if I have a problem.
8) People at my school are friendly to me.
9) Teachers here are not interested in people like me.
10) I am included in lots of activities at my school.
11) I am treated with as much respect as other students in my school.
12) I feel very different from most other students at my school.
13) I can really be myself at my school.
14) Teachers at my school respect me.
15) People at my school know that I can do good work.
16) I wish I were in a different school.
17) I feel proud to belong to the…
18) Other students at my school like me the way that I am.

SRP [Willow/Arc]	Mainstream School	Both – SRP & Mainstream School	None

Appendix I: Teacher Interview Schedule

1. What is your **role** in the school?
   Probe:
   a. How long have you worked at this school?

2. Can you tell me a bit about your **career** as a teacher?
   Probe:
   a. How long have you been teaching?
   b. Can you tell me about any training you have received in SEN and/or Inclusion?

3. Can you tell me about **how this school works with children with neurodivergence and SEN**?
   Probe:
   a. What do you think about the inclusion of students with SEND in this school?

4. Can you describe your experiences of **working with students from the SRP** in your lessons?
   Probe:
   a. How do you include students from the SRP in your lessons?
      i. What helps?
   b. Are there any challenges or difficulties for students within the mainstream?
      i. Why do you think this might be?
      ii. How could this be improved?
   c. Are there specific support/resources/strategies/reasonable adjustments you use to support their inclusion in your lessons?
   d. Social inclusion - How do you foster peer relationships and social interactions among students from the SRP in your classroom?
      i. What are the strengths and/or difficulties in this?
   e. How are the students included in the school in general?
      i. How might they be perceived by the other students?
   f. Are there any other challenges to supporting their inclusion? Why do you think this might be?
   g. How could this be improved?
   h. Do you feel you have received sufficient training on supporting and inclusion students with SEND including those from the SRP?

5. How do you **work with the staff from the SRP** to support the inclusion of students in your lessons?
   Probe:
   a. What are the strengths of this? / What works well?
   b. Are there any difficulties or barriers to this?
   c. How do you think this collaboration could be improved?
   d. Do you collaborate with other professionals to include students with neurodivergence and SEND?
   e. How they feel without SRP staff in lessons at support SRP students?

6. Tell me about your **relationships with the students in the SRP**?
   Probe:
   a. What are the strengths or positives to this?
   b. Are there any challenges or difficulties with this?
   c. How do you think this could be improved?
   d. What can you tell me about students from the SRPs relationships with other students?
      a. SRP & mainstream

7. Do you think students from the SRP feel a **sense of belonging** to this school?
   Probe:
   a. What do you perceive as elements this school's practice which impacts on the sense of belonging for students from the SRP?
   b. What could be the challenges to students' sense of belonging at school? Any unhelpful practice?
   c. What could help/support their sense of belonging in this school?

8. Specific SRP students:
      1.
      2.
      3.
      4.
   a. I'm interested in your thoughts on their sense of belonging and inclusion at school?

Appendix J: SRP Staff Interview Schedule

1. What is your **role** in the school?
   Probe:
   b. How long have you worked at this school?

2. Can you tell me a bit about your **career** as a teacher/TA/etc.?
   Probe:
   a. How long have you been teaching/working as a TA/etc.?
   b. Can you tell me about any training you have received in SEND and/or Inclusion?

3. Can you tell me about **how this school works with children with neurodivergence and SEND**?
   Probe:
   a. What do you think about the inclusion of students with SEND in this school?

4. Can you describe your **experiences of working with students from the SRP in the SRP**?
   Probe:
   a. What do the students do in the SRP/use the SRP for?
   b. What are the strengths for the students being part of the SRP?
   c. Are there any challenges or difficulties for students within the SRP?

5. Can you describe your experiences of **working with students from the SRP outside of the SRP, i.e., in their mainstream lessons**?
   Probe:
   a. What are the strengths for the students in accessing the mainstream?
      i. What helps?
   b. Are there any challenges or difficulties for students within the mainstream?
      i. Why do you think this might be?
      ii. How could this be improved?
   c. How do you include students from the SRP in mainstream lessons?
      i. Are there specific support/resources/strategies/reasonable adjustments you use to support their inclusion in mainstream lessons?
   d. Are the skills/technique strategies you use with SRP students transferable to be used to support as students with neurodivergnce and SEND?
   e. Social inclusion - How do you foster peer relationships and social interactions among students from the SRP in the mainstream environment?
      i. What are the strengths and/or difficulties in this?
   f. How are the students included in the school in general?
      i. How might they be perceived by the other students?

g. Are there any other challenges to supporting their inclusion? Why do you think this might be?
h. How could this be improved?
i. Do you feel you have received sufficient training on supporting and inclusion students with SEND including those from the SRP?

6. How do you **work with the staff from the mainstream** to support the inclusion of students in the mainstream?
   Probe:
   a. What are the strengths of this? / What works well?
   b. Are there any difficulties or barriers to this?
   c. How do you think this collaboration could be improved?
   d. Do you collaborate with other professionals to include students with neurodivergence and SEND?

7. Tell me about your **relationships with the students in the SRP**?
   Probe:
   a. What are the strengths or positives to this?
   b. Are there any challenges or difficulties with this?
   c. How do you think this could be improved?
   d. What can you tell me about students from the SRPs relationships with other students?
      i. SRP & mainstream students
      ii. Within the SRP and within the mainstream?

8. Do you think students from the SRP feel a **sense of belonging** to this school?
   Probe:
   a. What do you perceive as elements this school's practice which impacts on the sense of belonging for students from the SRP?
   b. Do you think students from the SRP feel a sense of belonging to the SRP?
   c. What could be the challenges to students' sense of belonging at school? Any unhelpful practice?
   d. What could help/support their sense of belonging in this school?

9. Specific SRP students:
      1.
      2.
      3.
      4.
   a. I'm interested in your thoughts on their sense of belonging and inclusion at school?

Appendix K: Coding Tree Overview

1. Experiences of Belonging	2. Conceptualisations of Belonging	
	3. Belonging in the SRP	4. SRP Providing/Functions
		5. SRP Advantages
	6. Belonging in Mainstream School	
7. Social Relationships and Interactions	8. Peer Relationships and Interactions	9. Interactions with Mainstream Peers
		10. Interactions with SRP Peers
		11. General Social Experiences
	12. Staff Relationships and Interactions	13. SRP Staff Interactions
		14. TA Interactions (in lessons)
		15. Mainstream Teacher Interactions
16. Environmental Factors Affecting Belonging	17. Physical and Sensory Environment	
	18. School Structures, Policies and Practice	19. School Structures and Organisational Practices
		20. School's Role in Promoting Inclusion and Belonging
		21. Systemic and Resource Barriers to Inclusion
22. Academic Experiences and Support	23. Learning Experiences and Challenges	
	24. Support Structures and Practices	25. SRP Support
		26. TA Support (in lessons)
		27. Ability Grouping
		28. Additional/Individual Support
29. Identity and Self-Perception	30. Identity Development	
	31. Stigma and 'Othering'	
32. Transition and Past School Experiences	33. Primary to Secondary Transition	
34. Emotional Wellbeing and Regulation		
35. Staff Training, Development and Collaboration	36. Staff Training and Development	
	37. SRP and Mainstream Staff Collaboration and Communication	
38. SRP Placement Considerations		
39. Role of Parent and Carers		
40. External Support and Agencies		

Appendix L: Detailed Coding Tree Framework

Student codes – Staff codes – Both Student & Staff codes – Observation only

Overarching themes (Parent codes)	Subthemes (Child Codes)	Codes	
1. Experiences of Belonging How students conceptualise, experience, and express their sense of belonging across different contexts	**1.1. Conceptualisations of Belonging**	- Belonging as acceptance - Belonging as feeling supported - Belonging as owning/having - Sense of belonging to the school - Ambivalent/indifferent to belonging - Unsure about belonging/happiness in whole school - Negative emotions associated with not belonging / positive emotions associated with belonging - Sense of belonging changes in different lessons/environments - Importance of trusting relationships/friendships for belonging - Belonging linked to identity - Is belonging linked to enjoying school - School attendance as an indicator of belonging - Feeling belonging despite negative experiences in school	
	1.2. Belonging in the SRP	- SRP feels like a part of the school - Comfortable with base students - Feel acceptance, valued, appreciated in the base - SRP provides a sense of belonging - Proud to be part of the base - Feeling comfortable in the base	**1.2.1 SRP Providing/ Functions:** - SRP as a starting point of the day - Safe spaces in base and mainstream - SRP used for break and lunch times - SRP provides a 'safe space' from the mainstream - SRP provides quiet, focused learning environment - SRP as emotional regulation space - SRP as a social space - SRP used to 'avoid' mainstream demands/lessons - Staff can monitor and support social interactions in the base
			1.2.2 SRP Advantages: - Advantages of the base - Less pressure in SRP than mainstream - Accessing base for interventions - SRP supports learning through small group interventions - Can be yourself in the base/can't be self in mainstream/school - SRP has more resources and freedom to support students - SRP is more than learning support

		- Preference for base over mainstream - Value the support of the base - Ambivalent about the base - Spending more time in base linked with not belonging	- SRP students access smaller class size - SRP matching students with potential friends - SRP fostering independence over time - Lessons/teaching in the base - SRP used to offer support to non-base students - Large number of students within the base promotes friendships and social opportunities
	1.3. Belonging in Mainstream School	- Belonging to the mainstream - Feeling 'normal' when accessing mainstream - Being in mainstream viewed as being 'normal' - Anxiety about mainstream students - Feeling different from peers with SEND - School has less sense of community compared to primary school - Do not feel valued in the mainstream/at school - Feeling the 'same' as mainstream students - Limited sense of belonging/acceptance in mainstream - Mixed feelings about interactions/friendships in mainstream - Negative past experiences in mainstream - Feeling different to mainstream students - Anxiety about attending mainstream - Feelings of not belonging/unhappy at school - No/limited access to mainstream	
2. Social Relationships and Interactions Students' social experiences, relationships, and interactions with peers and staff	**2.1. Peer Relationships and Interactions**	**2.1.1. Interactions with Mainstream Peers**	- Limited interactions with mainstream students - Avoiding interactions/conflicts with mainstream students - Socialising in mainstream during break times - Positive interactions/socialising with mainstream students - Validation from mainstream peers

			- Negative view of mainstream students - Mixed feelings about interactions/friendships in mainstream - Perceived they are disliked by staff (& students) - Difficulties understanding/tolerating/perceptions of mainstream student 'behaviour' / annoying - Frustrated with other student's behaviour - Awareness of mainstream peers perceptions/attention - Treated negatively by mainstream students - Peer perceptions and judgements about base students behaviour - Peer perceptions of additional support - Negative interactions between base students and mainstream students - Friendships with mainstream peers - SRP students experiences of bullying/exclusion - SRP name used as an insult / negative perceptions of base among mainstream students
		2.1.2. Interactions with SRP Peers	- Comfortable with base students - Conflict with other base students - Negative interactions between base students - Ambivalence about socialising with base students - Limited interactions with base students - Preference for/easier socialising with base students - Belonging with those you can relate to/shared experiences of base students

			- Typical friendship issues among base students - SRP students friendship progress to outside of school - 'someone for everyone in the base' - SRP students model social interactions for others - Large number of students within the base promotes friendships and social opportunities - Interactions with base students in mainstream lessons
		2.1.3. General Social Experience	- Friendships/socialising with both mainstream and base peers - Friendships outside of school - Socialising in both base and mainstream - Discomfort with peer behaviour outside structured settings - Having time to self - Playful interactions - Socialising separately with base and mainstream students - Gender differences in peer experiences - Peer pressure - Pressure to socialise/follow social norms - Preference for being alone/not socialising - Social communication and interaction differences/difficulties - Difficulties 'fitting in' - Importance of trusting relationships/friendships for belonging - SRP students experiences of bullying/exclusion - Difficulties understanding social interactions and behaviours - Improvement in peer relationships and interactions over time - Access to mainstream supports social understanding and skills development - SRP students socially included/accepted across school setting - Rare cases of bullying/stigma for SEN/base students - Respecting individual social preferences - Attempted peer interaction using humour - Initiated interaction not received by peer
	2.2. Staff Relationships and Interactions	**2.2.1. SRP Staff Interactions**	- Treated with respect by teachers (base) - SRP staff as primary support system/base default space - Can talk to base staff/ TAs - Trusted adult in base - SRP staff understand student's individual needs

			- Friendly 'informal' interactions between base staff and students - Time spent on building trust and relationships - Balance of maintaining relationships and tackling challenges/behaviour
		2.2.2. TA Interactions (in lessons)	- Feel supported by TA in lessons - TA support can be overwhelming/annoying - TAs in close proximity during lesson - Balancing independence and support from TA/depending on TA - TAs offering direct support in lesson - TA support perceived as intrusive/ resistant to TA support - Mixed feelings about TA support - Attachment to TAs - TA support emotional regulation - Students reliant on TA/learning support - Blurred boundaries in relationship between TAs and students - SRP students have a preference for particular staff
		2.2.3. Mainstream Teacher Interactions	- Negative perception of mainstream teachers/interactions - Ambivalence about teacher interactions/relationships - Perceived they are disliked by staff (& students) - Preference for kind teachers - Support from mainstream teacher unclear - Positive teacher/student interactions/relationships (mainstream) - SRP students encouraged to develop relationships with multiple staff members - Teacher available in lesson
3. Environmental Factors Affecting Belonging Physical, sensory, and structural environmental factors that impact students' experiences	**3.1. Physical and Sensory Environment**	- Noise and overstimulation as barriers to inclusion - Large number of students in mainstream - Avoidance of crowded spaces - Avoiding parts of mainstream environment - Impact of environment on access to mainstream and interactions/sensory sensitivities - Unappealing physical school environment - Preference for remote learning - Lack of resources and stimulation during break times - Distance between base and mainstream - SRP used to 'avoid' mainstream demands/lessons - Overwhelming environment	

			- Mainstream environment is large - Preference for quiet environment - Sensory/seeking behaviour - Appearing fatigued in mainstream lessons
	3.2. School Structures, Policies and Practices	**3.2.1. School Structures and Organisational Practices**	- Clear rules and structure to school - Tired from school day-early start - Clear divide/separation between mainstream and base - Alternative provision/curriculum - Pressure/demands of secondary school - Reasonable adjustment - to access mainstream environment and learning - Access to base/removal to base creating sense of 'othering' - Difficulties in academic inclusion - Contradictory inclusion practices - External/school focus on academics-achievement - Integration vs inclusion
		3.2.2. School's Role in Promoting Inclusion and Belonging	- Difficulties with mainstream school policies, processes and practices (including behaviour) - Universal, inclusive teaching for all students - School initiative anti-bullying - School perceived as supportive and inclusive of students with needs - School promoting diversity and inclusion - School promoting sense of belonging/community - School listens to and considers student voice and views - School supporting students (beyond academics) fosters belonging - Schools role in promoting inclusion and awareness of SEND - Need for school to tackle bullying of SEN students - Students involved in decisions to support agency and belonging - Teachers believe school has sense of belonging/community - Friendly, relaxed school atmosphere - Need whole school approach/backing to prioritising SEN awareness - Staff perception of limited sense of belonging/community in school
		3.2.3. Systemic and Resource Barriers to Inclusion	- School as a business rather than focusing on SEN needs - Concerns about the bureaucratic nature of SEN support - Financial barrier to SEN support

			- Staff time as a barrier to inclusion - Staff retention and consistency reflecting belonging - TA turnover and retention impacting students due to importance of consistent relationships - Staff perception of limited sense of belonging/community in school
4. Academic Experiences and Support Learning experiences, academic support and teaching practices	**4.1 Learning Experiences and Challenges**	- Importance of enjoying subjects - Learning alongside base students in mainstream lessons - Need for autonomy in learning - Preference for low demand lessons - Frustration/anxiety in lessons - Skills and abilities underestimated as base student - Enjoys attending school and lessons - Access to mainstream supports social understanding and skills development - Awareness of difficulties with learning - Minimal peer interactions in mainstream lessons - Active participation and engagement in lesson - Difficulties with learning (mainstream school) leading to negative emotions - Participation in lesson when directly prompted/encouraged - Using student interest to motivate - SEND used as an 'excuse' - Challenges in teaching SEND students in mainstream - Frustration with lack of academic choice and flexibility for SEN students - Differentiation remains a challenge for teachers - Balancing SEND strategies in busy classroom - Need tailoring teaching/strategies/approaches to individual students needs - Difficulties in academic inclusion - Group/paired work to support learning - Social disengagement impacting learning - 'Challenging behaviour' of base students - Low confidence as a barrier for base students - Independence in learning - Student initiating learning - Passive engagement in group settings - Selective participation - Reluctance to initiate participation - Celebrates success in learning - Preference for solitary working	

		- Disengaged from whole class learning - Direct support from teacher to engage in lesson	
	4.2. Support Structures and Practices	**4.2.1. SRP Support**	- SRP staff offer learning support - SRP staff support as a facilitator of belonging - SRP staff support conflict resolution - Importance of familiarity and routine - SRP and staff support essential for development and growth/emotions, confidence - SRP students receive more support and more consistent support - Unequal opportunity of support and intervention for base students
		4.2.2. TA Support (in lesson)	- TA support preferred in core subjects - TA support to differentiate and scaffold learning/1-1 support - TA support reduces over time - TA/teacher support to support confidence and motivation - TA supporting from a distance/occasional support - TAs seen as essential for learning support for base students - Teacher/TA monitoring learning promoting autonomy - Teacher/TA facilitates social interaction and inclusion - Demanding role of TA supporting multiple lessons/students
		4.2.3. Ability Grouping	- Ability grouping/sets limits inclusion - Lower set carries stigma - Sets/ability grouping should support access to learning - Lower expectations for SEND students/low demand/ no QFT
		4.2.4. Additional/Individual Support	- Values learning support - Individual learning support - Missing out on learning when not in mainstream - Exam access arrangements - Reasonable adjustment / to access mainstream environment and learning - Importance of support outside of base/in mainstream - Removed to access learning in the base - Need tailoring teaching/strategies/approaches to individual students needs - Flexible approach to learning and support of base students
5. Identity and Self-Perception	**5.1. Identity Development**	- Autism diagnosis supporting understanding - Received autism diagnosis	

Students' identity development, self-perception and how they are perceived by others		- SEN needs/autism recognised due to difficulties in secondary school - Not disclosing SEND to other students/don't talk about SEND - Pushing self/want to attend mainstream - Pressure to socialise/follow social norms - Positive sense of self - Skills and abilities underestimated as base student - Unbothered by others' perceptions - Growth and development through age and experience - Self-advocacy challenges - Unique differences as a positive - Difficulties 'fitting in' - Diversity / differences among all students - Students 'mask' needs/change behaviour to fit in with peers - Respecting individual social preferences - SEND used as an 'excuse' - Developing their identity - Student understanding of themselves and their identity - Teaching skills for future/adulthood
	5.2. Stigma and Othering	- Ambivalence about 'feeling different' in relation to belonging - Not disclosing SEND to other students/don't talk about SEND - Treated equally - Comparing self to 'mainstream' students - Treated different/negatively for being a base student/different behaviour - Need for understanding/awareness of SEND (and the base) - Being different (base student) can be a negative - SRP students experiences of bullying/exclusion - Stigma as a 'base student' - Stigma in wider society related to SEN - Stigma around the base is often self/perceived - Access to base/removal to base creating sense of 'othering' - High number of SEN students in school reduce stigma - SRP name used as an insult / negative perceptions of base among mainstream students - Disclosing SEND to support student understanding - Students spending less time in base like to distance from base / don't like label - Low confidence as a barrier for base students - Fostering knowledge and awareness of SEND through base students lived experience - Lack of wider society/public awareness and knowledge of SEN

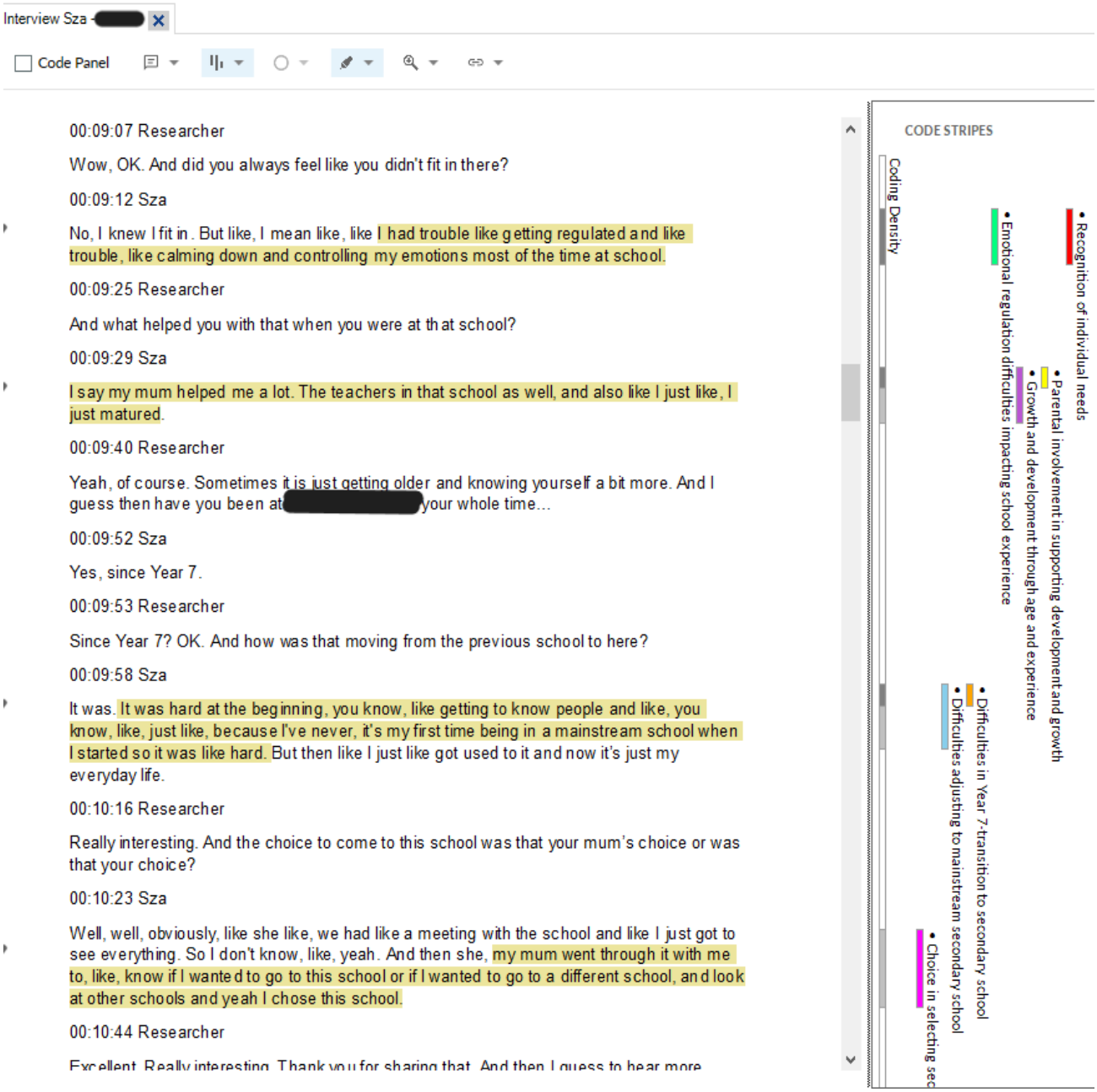
		- Lower set carries stigma
6. Transition and Past School Experiences Student's transition from primary to secondary school and past experiences in education	**6.1. Primary to Secondary Transition**	- Difficult past experiences at school - School selection based on base - Choice in selecting secondary school - Preference from primary school over secondary school - Experienced belonging in primary school - Positive past experience in primary school - Mixed primary school experience - More comfortable environment in primary school - More freedom in primary school - Positive transition to secondary school - School has less sense of community compared to primary school - Pressure/demands of secondary school - Difficulties adjusting to mainstream secondary school - Difficulties in Year 7/transition to secondary school - Additional support/induction for new Year 7 base students - Negative primary school experience in relation to their SEND - SRP students made considerable progress since primary - Impact of transition on belonging
7. Emotional Wellbeing and Regulation Emotional experiences	- Frustrated with other student's behaviour - Attendance difficulties - Negative perception of school - Parental involvement in supporting development and growth - Emotional regulation difficulties impacting school experience - Feels unheard/misunderstood by others - Clubs provide a sense of enjoyment/belonging - Importance of time, space and feeling heard for emotional regulation - Fixed thinking - 'Challenging behaviour' of base students - Difficulties with new unfamiliar people - Teacher's understanding of base students needs/behaviour - Overprotective of base students	

8. Staff Training, Development and Collaboration	**8.1. Staff Training and Development**	- Limited teacher training/previous training/experience on SEND - Staff training on SEN - Staff choice and interest in SEND/training - Teacher experience and knowledge / training in SEND - Limited training CPD for TAs - Repetitive/generic SEND training - Challenges in teaching SEND students in mainstream - Differentiation remains a challenge for teachers - Balancing SEND strategies in busy classroom - Variation in TA professionalism - Teachers experience teaching base students helps develop their teaching practices (for SEN and all students) - Need whole school approach/backing to prioritising SEN awareness - Need tailoring teaching/strategies/approaches to individual students needs
	8.2. SRP and Mainstream Staff Collaboration and Communication	- Importance of collaboration between base and mainstream staff/bridging - Difficulties in collaborating/working between base and mainstream - Lack of communication between TAs and teachers - Dual staff role in base and mainstream - Teacher perceptions and understanding of base staff role - Responsibility falls on base staff - Staff time as a barrier to inclusion
9. SRP Placement Considerations	- School selection based on base - Some students have negative experiences in base in mainstream school - Access to mainstream supports social understanding and skills development - SRP placement does not work for all SEND students - Students placed in base where placement is viewed as 'not appropriate' - Decision made for students - Staying in the base can impact social inclusion and skills - Different levels of support including within the base - SRP placements viewed as 'affordable' placement for SEND students	
10. Role of Parents and Carers	- Parental involvement in supporting development and growth - Can access the community - Parental feedback highlights social progress/ positive parental perceptions - Importance of working with family / home-school relationship	
11. External Support and Agencies	- Support from/involvement with external agencies	

OUTLIERS	- Creative hobbies and interests - Experience attending a special school - Preference for following the rules/sense of justice/'unfair' - Staff lived experience of SEND/mental health difficulties - Teachers need to feel a sense of belonging too - Teachers teaching base students subjects outside of their specialisation - Leaving education based job due to frustrations with system - Need for early intervention to identify appropriate support for base students - Quiet base students overlooked/focus on behaviour

Appendix M: Examples of Coded Interview Transcripts

Student Interview Coded Extract:



Interview Sza -[redacted]

Code Panel

00:09:07 Researcher

Wow, OK. And did you always feel like you didn't fit in there?

00:09:12 Sza

No, I knew I fit in. But like, I mean like, like I had trouble like getting regulated and like trouble, like calming down and controlling my emotions most of the time at school.

00:09:25 Researcher

And what helped you with that when you were at that school?

00:09:29 Sza

I say my mum helped me a lot. The teachers in that school as well, and also like I just like, I just matured.

00:09:40 Researcher

Yeah, of course. Sometimes it is just getting older and knowing yourself a bit more. And I guess then have you been at[redacted]your whole time...

00:09:52 Sza

Yes, since Year 7.

00:09:53 Researcher

Since Year 7? OK. And how was that moving from the previous school to here?

00:09:58 Sza

It was. It was hard at the beginning, you know, like getting to know people and like, you know, like, just like, because I've never, it's my first time being in a mainstream school when I started so it was like hard. But then like I just like got used to it and now it's just my everyday life.

00:10:16 Researcher

Really interesting. And the choice to come to this school was that your mum's choice or was that your choice?

00:10:23 Sza

Well, well, obviously, like she like, we had like a meeting with the school and like I just got to see everything. So I don't know, like, yeah. And then she, my mum went through it with me to, like, know if I wanted to go to this school or if I wanted to go to a different school, and look at other schools and yeah I chose this school.

00:10:44 Researcher

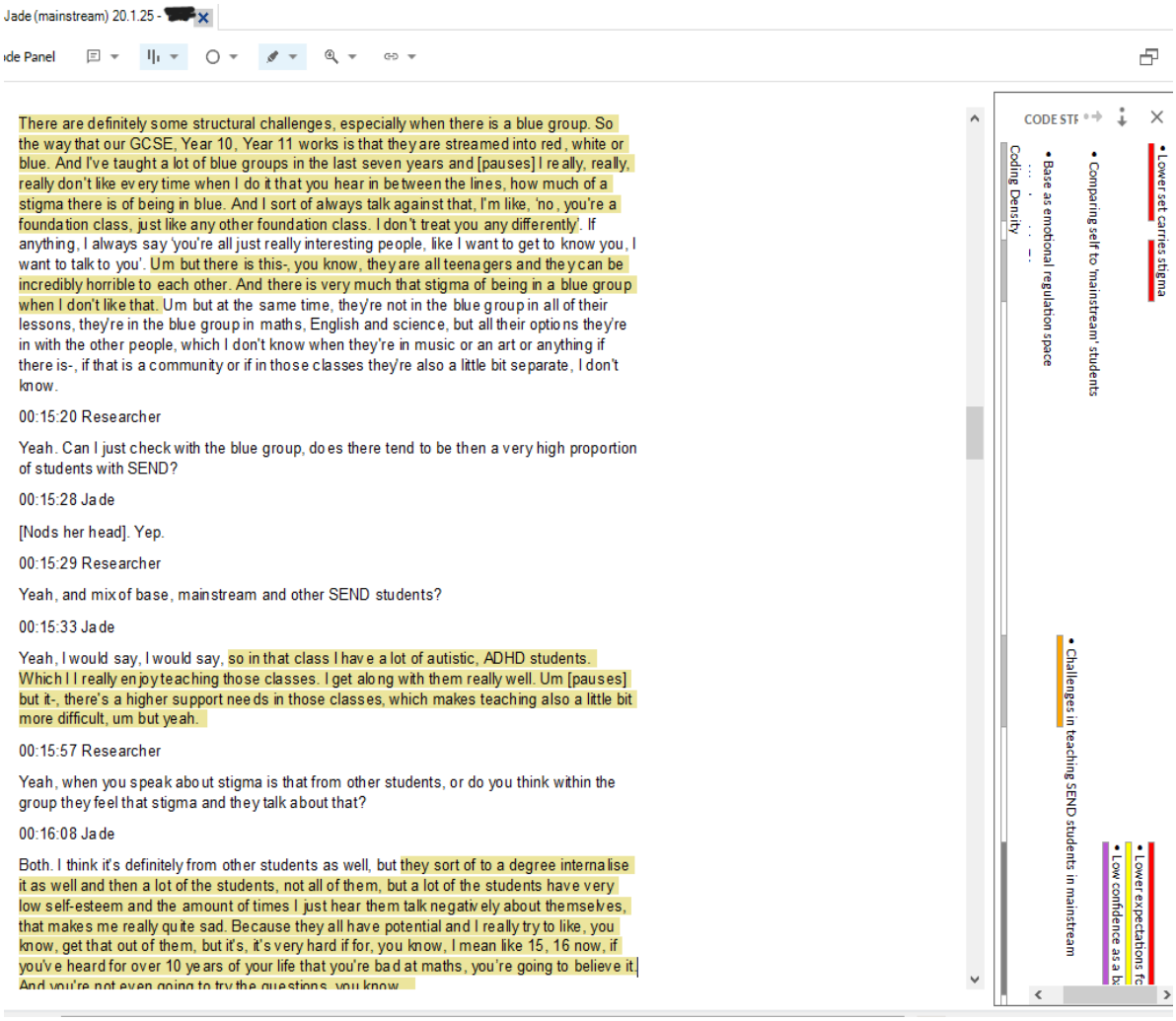
Excellent. Really interesting. Thank you for sharing that. And then I guess to hear more

CODE STRIPES

Coding Density

- Recognition of individual needs
- Parental involvement in supporting development and growth
- Growth and development through age and experience
- Emotional regulation difficulties impacting school experience
- Difficulties in Year 7-transition to secondary school
- Difficulties adjusting to mainstream secondary school
- Choice in selecting sec

Teacher Interview Coded Extract:



Appendix N: Full Ethics Form

Institute of Education

UCL

Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form

Anyone conducting research under the auspices of the Institute of Education (staff, students or visitors) where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants, is required to gain ethical approval before starting. This includes preliminary and pilot studies. Please answer all relevant questions in simple terms that can be understood by a lay person and note that your form may be returned if incomplete.

Registering your study with the UCL Data Protection Officer as part of the UCL Research Ethics Review Process

If you are proposing to collect personal data i.e. data from which a living individual can be identified **you must be registered with the UCL Data Protection Office before you submit your ethics application for review**. To do this, email the complete ethics form to the UCL Data Protection Office. Once your registration number is received, add it to the form* and submit it to your supervisor for approval. If the Data Protection Office advises you to make changes to the way in which you propose to collect and store the data this should be reflected in your ethics application form.

Please note that the completion of the UCL GDPR online training is mandatory for all PhD students.

Section 1 – Project details

a. Project title: Exploring how Specially Resourced Provisions in mainstream secondary schools support the inclusion of young people with SEND.
b. Student name and ID number (e.g. ABC12345678): Lisa Sheridan 22240135
c. ***UCL Data Protection Registration Number:** Z6364106/2024/06/196 social research
    a. Date Issued: 17.06.2024
d. Supervisor/Personal Tutor: Enter text
e. Department: Psychology and Human Development
f. Course category (Tick one):

PhD	☐
EdD	☐
DEdPsy	☒

g. **If applicable**, state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed.
h. Intended research start date: 17th June 2024

i. Intended research end date: 23rd May 2025
j. Country fieldwork will be conducted in: England
k. If research to be conducted abroad please check the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and submit a completed travel risk assessment form (see guidelines). If the FCO advice is against travel this will be required before ethical approval can be granted: *UCL travel advice webpage*
l. Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?

Yes ☐
External Committee Name: Enter text
Date of Approval: Enter text

No ☐ ***go to Section 2***

If yes:
- Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.
- Proceed to Section 10 Attachments.

Note: Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) or Social Care Research Ethics Committee (SCREC). In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.

Section 2 - Research methods summary (tick all that apply)

☒ Interviews
☐ Focus Groups
☒ Questionnaires
☐ Action Research
☒ Observation
☐ Literature Review
☐ Controlled trial/other intervention study
☐ Use of personal records
☐ Systematic review **– if only method used go to Section 5**
☐ Secondary data analysis ***– if secondary analysis used go to Section 6***
☐ Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups
☐ Other, give details: Enter text

Please provide an overview of the project, focusing on your methodology. This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection (including justifications for methods chosen and description of topics/questions to be asked), reporting and dissemination. Please focus on your methodology; the theory, policy, or literary background of your work can be provided in an attached document (i.e. a full research proposal or case for support document). *Minimum 150 words required.*

Purpose and aims of the research

This study aims to explore students with special educational needs and/or disabilities' (SEND) experiences of inclusion in mainstream secondary schools. Although mainstream schools can benefit students with SEND academically and socially (Lindsey et al., 2016), some students experience poor sense of belonging and exclusionary behaviours as a result of othering due to perceived differences (Dimitrellou et al., 2020; Subban et al., 2022). This study will focus on the role of specially resourced provisions (SRP) in the inclusion of students with SEND in their mainstream classes. SRPs are thought to be positioned between the two polarised positions of inclusion (rights-based and needs-based) (Ravet, 2011), yet there is a gap in the literature in exploring students with SEND's experiences of how these settings facilitate their inclusion in mainstream classrooms in addition to teacher's views on SRPs in facilitating inclusion. This research will shed light on how SRPs work as a model to facilitate the educational and social inclusion of children with SEND in mainstream secondary schools.

Research questions

1. How do students attending an SRP in a mainstream secondary school experience belonging?
2. How do students' experience of belonging within the SRP and their mainstream lessons?
3. What facilitates belonging for students attending an SRP in a mainstream secondary school?

Research design & methodology

This study takes an interpretivist epsitimology which recognises the subjective understanding and interpretation of social phenomena. It focuses on how individuals or groups make sense of their experiences, interactions, and the world around them. This is suitable to this research given it explores student's subjective experiences of inclusion particularly within SRPs. This research reflects a social constructionist

ontology whereby truth and knowledge are constructed by interactions between individuals in their worlds within a social context (Crotty, 1998). The research is concerned with individuals' unique experiences of being included as part of an SRP and how they understand their inclusion in the mainstream.

Considering the purpose of exploring the subjective experiences of students and the social constructionist stance, the research suits a qualitative style of investigation. Given the exploratory nature of the study as a relatively under researched area, this study will take on an exploratory case study research design (Yin, 1994).

The participants will be secondary students from year 7 to year 13 with an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP) who are currently enrolled at a Specially Resourced Provision (SRP) at a mainstream secondary school. Teaching/support staff from the SRP and teaching staff from the mainstream school will also be recruited.

The sampling procedures will involve a purposive, criterion-based sampling method. I will recruit participants by contacting secondary schools with an SRP within my LA placement to seek interest in participating in the study. Two mainstream secondary schools with an SRP attached will be recruited. The participants will include four students from the SRP to be interviewed from each school. Another group of four young people from the SRP will be recruited initially from one of the schools, as part of the planning and analysis phase of the study. Students meeting the following criteria will be invited to participate in the study: The students are enrolled at an SRP within a mainstream secondary school, are in Years 7 to Year 13, and have an EHCP. Participants will also include two teachers/TAs from the SRP and two subject teachers from the mainstream school. I will liaise with the teachers and gatekeepers and the school will make choices on students they feel can access the materials and concepts in the study.

Data Collection

To explore the complexities of inclusion and belonging of students within the SRP, a multitude of data will be collected to deepen understanding and answer the research questions. The study involves five stages that are outlined in detail in this section and in summary in the table below.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">School 1</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">1st – Planning Phase: Research Group
3-4 students will take part in a discussion to inform interview questions based on their experiences and views using the following participatory research method approaches:
1. Drawing the Ideal School technique
2. Graffiti Wall technique
3. Diamond Ranking activity</td></tr>
<tr><th>School 1</th><th>School 2</th></tr>
<tr><td>2nd – Observations
Unstructured field observations will be conducted in the SRP setting and of the 3-4 different students who will be interviewed using the 3 C's approach.</td><td>2nd – Observations
Unstructured field observations will be conducted in the SRP setting and of the 3-4 different students who will be interviewed using the 3 C's approach.</td></tr>
</table>

Each student will be observed on three occasions: 1. Mainstream lesson 2. Within the SRP	Each student will be observed on three occasions: 1. Mainstream lesson 2. Within the SRP
3rd – Interviews with Students 3-4 students will take part in semi-structured interviews with questions informed by the Research Group in addition to: 1. Visual sorting activity informed by Research Group findings 2. Relationship Circle tool 3. Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale	**3rd – Interviews with Students** 3-4 students will take part in semi-structured interviews with questions informed by the Research Group in addition to: 1. Visual sorting activity informed by Research Group finding 2. Relationship Circle tool 3. Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale
4th – Interviews with Teaching Staff 2 mainstream teachers and 2 staff from SRP will take part in semi-structured interviews	**4th – Interviews with Teaching Staff** 2 mainstream teachers and 2 staff from SRP will take part in semi-structured interviews

1st - Planning Phase: Participatory Research Method Approaches

This research will draw on participatory approaches as to understand their experiences of inclusion and belonging, students with SEND must be involved meaningfully (Fleming et al., 2023; Thomas & Loxley, 2022). Participatory approaches help address power imbalances between the adult researcher and child participants. Given the social constructionist stance of the research, to understand the students' experiences of inclusion and belonging, they should be helped to participate meaningfully (Fleming et al., 2023).

The planning phase of the study involves using participatory approaches with a 'Research Group' of four students from the SRP in one of the schools to develop the issues to be examined during the main phases of data collection, e.g., the individual interviews. To facilitate and support the discussion during the planning phase, a number of participatory research method approaches and person-centred tools will be used.

- Drawing the Ideal School: The 'Drawing the Ideal School' technique (Moran, 2001) engages children in actively exploring and expressing their perspectives, drawing upon principles from Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955). This approach aims to delve into children's fundamental constructs of themselves and their perspectives of the world therefore aligning with the social constructionist epistemology. The Research Group will be given the option to draw, write or verbally share their responses. All the key themes discussed will be drawn out for the next stages of the discussion.
- Graffiti Wall: The students will be asked to write or draw on Post-it Notes, things they like at school, and things that help them feel they 'belong' at school on one colour. They will also be asked to write the things they don't like about school, or that are not important to them on another colour. The Research Group will then stick the Post-it Notes on a 'Graffiti Wall' with one colour on each side. There will be two Graffiti Walls, one to elicit students'

feelings about their mainstream classes and one to elicit feelings about the SRP. This is based on an adapted version of the approach by Hill et al. (2016) and was found effective in capturing the voice of children and young people with SEND.

- Diamond ranking: Themes gathered from the Ideal School and Graffiti Wall techniques will be presented on a set of picture cards and the Research Group will complete the Diamond Ranking activity to gain a sense of importance of aspects of their school experiences. This method is completed in small groups and involves the ranking of photographs or statements in order of importance in response to the question 'what helps you feel that you belong at school?' (Clark, 2012). The Diamond Ranking activity reduces the power imbalance between the researcher and participants, as young people play an active role, in determining how the task is completed.

2nd - Main Phase: Observations

A series of unstructured observations will be conducted within each school setting focusing on the qualitative information to provide further insight into the different contexts including the aims, objectives and ethos of the provision. Four students from the SRP from each school will be selected for the main phase of data collection. Observations will be conducted of the students prior to semi-structured interviews within their typical mainstream environment, within the SRP and during unstructured times such as break time. The purpose of the observations are to provide further context and understanding of the students' SOB and inclusion at school in line with the case study research design (Yin, 1994). Observations allow for the researcher to directly observe within a naturalistic setting and triangulate data from the participant interviews (Bryman, 2016). A non-participant observer position will be adopted, and observations of the environments will focus on the interactions and activities of the students as they naturally occur.

The observational data will be collected using Fetter and Rubinstein's (2019) '3 Cs' approach (Content, Context, and Concepts) to unstructured observations to help focus the observations. This framework allows documenting of the 'context' (the circumstances that an observation occurs), 'content' (description of what happened) and 'concepts' (any theoretical insights that emerge) that are noticed during observation sessions in the SRP. This framework helps researchers systematically capture and organise their observations in a meaningful way, especially in complex or dynamic environments. Fetter and Rubinstein (2019) developed this framework as a systematic method to address the challenges of recording and interpreting unstructured field observations and to improve rigor and quality of observation. This approach emerged from their recognition of the difficulties researchers face in capturing, organising, and making sense of complex, unstructured data in field settings. In this study, using the 3 Cs approach for observation provides a structured

yet flexible framework to capture and analyse observation data captured in the SRP. It helps to organise the data collection and improve interpretation for qualitative analysis. It allows for a holistic understanding which aligns with my holistic understanding of belonging as a construct. The 3 C's approach enhances reflexivity and objectivity which is important in line with my reflexive research position aligning with the study's data analysis (reflexive Thematic Analysis). This approach also allows for flexibility across settings which works for when moving between lessons in SRP, mainstream and playground enabling flexibility to the student (see Appendix A for an example of the observation schedule).

The 3 C's approach also allows for clarifying information with participants to ensure that the information gathered is accurate, clear, and meaningful with the researcher adopting a 'marginal participant' role. The researcher will act as an observer with the option of interacting and asking clarifying questions with the participants to develop a deeper understanding of what is being observed.

3rd - Main Phase: Interviews with Students

To accurately understand and hear the voices of the students, face-to-face interviews in which the researcher can build a rapport with the students is imperative. Semi-structured interviews will be used due to their flexibility in allowing for answers to be further explored given students' experience of inclusion and belonging while attending an SRP are under researched areas. Interview questions will be led by themes identified in the planning phase by the Research Group, although a list of potential interview questions can be found in Appendix B. The interviews will last between 30 to 45 minutes. The interview will involve using the techniques outlined below which will be used flexibly throughout, to support students accessibility and understanding, in addition to their participation in the interviews.

- Facilitating Pupil Voice: The processing and understanding of verbal language in interviews may present a challenge for some students with SEND, such as those with social communication needs, particularly given the intricate nature of inclusion and belonging (Beresford et al., 2004). Researchers propose using unique, personalised methods to support understanding of language and fully capture students' experiences, with an emphasis on visual methods (Howard et al., 2019). To elicit pupil voice, a visual sorting task similar to 'Talking Mats', a visual communication framework supporting individuals with communication difficulties will be used (Murphy, 1998). This will help facilitate discussion around students' experiences in school. Such visual tools will help support students' understadning and therefore ability to take part in the interviews. In response to the question 'what helps you feel like you belong in school?' the students will sort the visuals into 'yes', 'sometimes' and 'no' using a visual red, amber, green traffic light system. This will be repeated to elicit feelings of

belonging in both mainstream lessons and in the SRP. The visual cards will be developed from themes discussed by the Research Group.

- Relationships Circle: To support discussion around relationships in line with the construct of SOB, the Person-Centred Planning Tool 'Relationship Circle' will be used. This visual tool allows individuals to identify significant people in their life by placing themselves in the middle and drawing the people in their lives within the concentric circles around them, with closer proximity signalling increased importance (Ryan & Carey, 2008). Using a visual tool will support dialogue around relationships and ensure students understand and can contribute meaningfully within the individual interviews.
- Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale: There is no clear agreement on a definitive tool to measure SOB (Allen et al., 2021). The literature highlights use of holistic assessments aligning with the BPSEM of belonging, as described using the methods above (Allen et al., 2021). Researchers have highlighted the need for pupil voice on SOB particularly for students with SEND whose views are often overlooked (Midgen et al., 2019). To add further insight to the construct of belonging, standardised tools can be used to triangulate the views shared by the young people and advance knowledge on belonging of students.

  The Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM) is a frequently used tool that measures students' SOB at school with a specific emphasis on social relations identifying social and contextual influences on students' belonging (Goodenow, 1993). This measure aligns with the holistic definition of SOB used in this research that focuses on the importance of the relationships within the school context (Allen & Kern, 2017). The PSSM contains 18 items and its validity and reliability are supported within the literature with an internal consistency reported between 0.77 to 0.88 for students aged nine to 14 years (Allen & Kern, 2017; Goodenow, 1993). The students will complete the PSSM after their individual interviews which can be found in Appendix C. Researchers caution the use of standardised measures with SEND populations due to being standardised against individuals without SEND (Robertson, 2010). Therefore, the PSSM will be an additional measure of SOB along with individual interviews and observations. However, the PSSM was considered suitable for this study as it has successfully been used with populations with SEND (Hebron, 2018; McMahon et al., 2008).

  The PSSM will be administered in an alternative way from the standardised procedure. Given the purpose of the study in exploring students' SOB within the SRP and within the mainstream school, the students will answer each question/statement in relation to the SRP and mainstream. For example, for the first item on the PSSM, the students will be presented with the statement; 'I feel like a part of my school' by the researcher. They will be presented with 4 option cards and asked to select one; 'SRP', 'mainstream school, 'both' and 'none' to represent which setting they feel a part of. The PSSM will be administered before the individual interviews to introduce the concept of

belonging to the students, allowing for their answers to be further explored. It will take 5 to 10 minutes to complete.

4th - Main Phase: Interviews with Teaching Staff

Two teaching/support staff from the SRP and two teachers from the mainstream school will be selected from each school to take part in semi-structured interviews. Teacher's views will be sought in order to broaden the understanding of how the SRP facilitates the inclusion of students with SEND in each setting. The interview questions incorporate the Research Group's views captured in the planning phase, although a list of potential interview questions can be found in Appendix D. The interviews will last approximately 30-45 minutes.

The study will include a pilot phase to test the developed interview schedules, observation schedules and PSSM questionnaire.

The findings will be disseminated through a presentation to the schools taking part in the research in addition to the LA's Educational Psychology Service. It is important that participants are anonymised and not identifiable in the study.

Analysis: Reflective Thematic Analysis

The qualitative data gathered from interviews will be analysed using thematic analysis (TA). TA involves analysing and interpreting patterns and themes within qualitative data and is relevant to this research as it looks at participants' life experiences and views (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method aligns with the social constructionist position of this research which emphasises the importance of individual experiences and views.

Qualitative data gathered from individual interviews will be analysed using thematic analysis (TA). TA involves analysing and interpreting patterns and themes within qualitative data and is relevant to this research as it looks at participants' life experiences and views (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method is in line with the social constructionist stance of this research which emphasises the importance of individual experiences and views.

I will consider the need to be reflexive and my positionality throughout due to potential biases and influences when working with qualitative data. A 'reflexive' TA approach will be adopted which acknowledges that my orientations may change as the analysis progresses, allowing critical reflection on my role as the researcher throughout the process. Braun and Clarke (2021) outline this is done by journaling including background, experience, and social and political positioning. I will consider that themes could be influenced by my personal experiences (i.e., working with students with SEND) and keep a reflexive journal.

Themes within the students' data will be identified and reviewed, followed by the data from teaching staff and observation data following the same process. This will enable me to adopt an inductive stance and investigate any potential patterns in the data among the participants.

Section 3 – research Participants (tick all that apply)

☐ Early years/pre-school
☒ Ages 5-11
☒ Ages 12-16
☒ Young people aged 17-18
☒ Adults please specify below
☐ Unknown – specify below
☐ No participants

10-12 secondary school aged children (Years 7 to Year 13, ages 11 to 18 years) with an EHCP who are enrolled at a Specially Resourced Provision in a mainstream secondary school. The adults include 4 teaching or support staff from the Specially Resourced Provision and 4 teachers from the mainstream school.

Note: Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) or Social Care Research Ethics Committee (SCREC).

Section 4 - Security-sensitive material (only complete if applicable)

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.

a. Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?
   Yes* ☐ No ☐
b. Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?
   Yes* ☐ No ☐
c. Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?
   Yes* ☐ No ☐

* *Give further details in* ***Section 8 Ethical Issues***

Section 5 – Systematic reviews of research (only complete if applicable)

a. Will you be collecting any new data from participants?
   Yes* ☐ No ☐
b. Will you be analysing any secondary data?
   Yes* ☐ No ☐

* *Give further details in* ***Section 8 Ethical Issues***

If your methods do not involve engagement with participants (e.g. systematic review, literature review) ***and*** *if you have answered* ***No*** *to both questions, please go to* ***Section 8 Attachments.***

Section 6 - Secondary data analysis (only complete if applicable)

a. Name of dataset/s: Enter text
b. Owner of dataset/s: Enter text
c. Are the data in the public domain?
   Yes ☐ No ☐
   If no, *do you have the owner's permission/license?*
   Yes ☐ No* ☐

d. Are the data special category personal data (i.e. personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation)?
   Yes* ☐ No ☐

e. Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?
   Yes ☐ No* ☐
f. **If no**, was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?
   Yes ☐ No* ☐
g. **If no,** was data collected prior to ethics approval process?
   Yes ☐ No* ☐

* *Give further details in* ***Section 8 Ethical Issues***

If secondary analysis is only method used ***and*** *no answers with asterisks are ticked, go to* ***Section 9 Attachments.***

Section 7 – Data Storage and Security

Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.

a. Data subjects - Who will the data be collected from?
Data will be collected from the individual interviews with the young people and from the participatory tools used with the Research Group. Observation data will be collated from the young people who take part in the individual interviews. Data will also be collected from individually interviews with teaching staff from the SRP and the mainstream school.

b. What data will be collected? Please provide details of the type of personal data to be collected
Qualitative data from the young people's responses to the interviews and participatory methods outlined above will be collected and analysed to form themes and codes. Qualitative data will also be collected from the teachers. Observation data will be collated from the young people and will focus on the qualitative information to provide further insight into the different contexts (mainstream and SRP). Quantitative data will be gathered from the PSSMS questionnaire. The young people's age, gender, year group and special, educational need and/or disability will also be collected from the Head of the SRP.

Is the data anonymised? Yes ☐ No* ☒

Do you plan to anonymise the data? Yes* ☒ No ☐

Do you plan to use individual level data? Yes* ☒ No ☐

Do you plan to pseudonymise the data? Yes* ☒ No ☐

** Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

c. **Disclosure –** Who will the results of your project be disclosed to?
The researcher and their two supervisors. The anonymised results will be shared with the participating schools, as part of the dissertation and potentially in subsequent future publications.
Disclosure – Will personal data be disclosed as part of your project?
No

d. Data storage – Please provide details on how and where the data will be stored i.e. UCL network, encrypted USB stick**, encrypted laptop** etc. The interview data from the young people and teachers will be audio recorded using a recording device. The data from the interviews will then be transcribed onto a digital document stored on the encrypted UCL cloud storage. The hard copies of the observation data will be stored in a locked storage cabinet and destroyed after 5 years. Data collected from the participatory methods, e.g., drawings from the Ideal School technique will be stored as digital images on the encrypted UCL cloud storage, and original copies will be stored in a locked storage cabinet and destroyed after the degree is awarded. The PSSM questionnaire will be completed by the students in hard copy form; the data will be transferred onto a digital document that will be stored on the

encrypted UCL cloud storage. The hard copies of the PSSM questionnaire will be stored in a locked storage cabinet and destroyed after 5 years.

*** Advanced Encryption Standard 256 bit encryption which has been made a security standard within the NHS*

e. **Data Safe Haven (Identifiable Data Handling Solution)** – Will the personal identifiable data collected and processed as part of this research be stored in the UCL Data Safe Haven (mainly used by SLMS divisions, institutes and departments)?
Yes ☐ No ☒

f. How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format?
The interview, observation and questionnaire data will pseudonymised and stored on the encrypted UCL cloud storage which can be stored for 5 years after the research is completed.

Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area? (If yes, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with GDPR and state what these arrangements are)
No

Will data be archived for use by other researchers? (If yes, please provide details.)
No

g. If personal data is used as part of your project, describe what measures you have in place to ensure that the data is only used for the research purpose e.g. pseudonymisation and short retention period of data'.
The data will be anonymised, and participants will be given pseudonyms. The data will only be viewed by the research and their two supervisors. The data will be kept and stored on the encrypted UCL cloud storage for 5 years after the research is completed.

*** Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues***

Section 8 – Ethical Issues

Please state clearly the ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research and how will they be addressed.

All issues that may apply should be addressed. Some examples are given below, further information can be found in the guidelines. *Minimum 150 words required.*

- Methods

- Sampling
- Recruitment
- Gatekeepers
- Informed consent
- Potentially vulnerable participants
- Safeguarding/child protection
- Sensitive topics
- International research
- Risks to participants and/or researchers
- Confidentiality/Anonymity
- Disclosures/limits to confidentiality
- Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)
- Reporting
- Dissemination and use of findings

Confidentiality/Anonymity

All identifying information will be anonymised by changing participant names to a pseudonym such that no individual is identifiable through the research. It will be made clear to all research participants both verbally and through the information sheets and consent forms that they will remain unidentifiable. Participants names and identity will not be revealed in the analysis and report of the study findings. This protects the full anonymity of participants and ensures that there are no data breaches or GDPR concerns. All data will be handled in accordance with GDPR.

Informed consent

All participants will give fully informed consent. Headteachers will receive an information sheet and give written consent to opt into the study. Parental consent will be sought for the students participating in the interviews and observations, and the participatory stage of the study (Research Group) by providing parents and carers with a participant information sheet and opt in consent form. Parents and carers will be made aware of the purpose and procedure of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Parents will provide written informed consent. The pupils' assent will be obtained by the researcher with a participant information sheet which is also the consent form whereby they will be asked for written assent. The pupils will also be asked for verbal consent to confirm participation ahead of the Research Group stage and individual interviews. Informed consent will be sought from the teachers participating in interviews.

For classroom observations, informed consent will be sought from teachers, and parents of target students. The Headteacher can give consent for the observation to take place and then parents of other students in the class have the opportunity to opt out through school sending an information sheet to all parents of the other students

with the option to opt out. All participants will also be reminded in the participation information sheet that they can withdraw consent at any time.

For students aged 16 or older, I will carefully discuss with their teachers regarding their capacity and ability to consent to the study in line with the Mental Capacity Act. If there are any doubts regarding the capacity of students aged 16 to older to consent, they will not be included within the study.

Protection from Harm and Duty of Care

I recognise that when working with young people the power imbalance between myself as the adult researcher and the young people. I will emphasise the voluntary nature of the young person's participation in the research, ensuring they can withdraw at any time without consequences. I will make the interview location and environment safe and comfortable for the young people, by interviewing them in familiar or safe space and having a trusted adult in the room if required. To minimise any distress, I will speak with the young people's teachers about how the individual might need questions and activities mediated, e.g., breaking down questions, visuals, fidget toys, movement breaks, adult present in room. A trusted adult at school can explain the study to the young person and what it entails to ensure they are happy to participate. I will spend time with the young people before the interview, playing icebreaker games to build rapport. I will ensure I am using age-appropriate language and additional supports such as visual aids where possible.

Discussions with school staff will be had to share how the study and interviews may evoke sensitivity for some young people (around the concepts of inclusion and belonging at school). School staff will be asked to support young people if needed following interview sessions. If difficulties arise during interviews and the young person becomes upset/distressed/overwhelmed I will cease the interview and support the young person to find a trusted adult with whom they trust and can debrief.

If any incidents of disclosure or safeguarding concerns arise, I will report this to the Designated Safeguarding Lead in the school and inform the young person's key adult/teacher so they can offer immediate support in line with the school procedures or the local authority procedures in respect to my role as an EP, as appropriate. The young people will be told at the start of the interviews, that what they share in the interview will be confidential, but that if they share something that concerns their safety or the safety of someone else, I might need to talk to someone who can help, like another trusted adult to make sure that everyone stays safe and gets the support they need.

I recognise the power relations at play between myself as a doctoral researcher/trainee educational psychologist and the teachers I am interviewing. I will consider the importance of rapport building at the start of the interview and being clear about the voluntary nature of their participation. I will share the clear objectives

of the research and avoid jargon language. I will offer flexibility in how the teacher would like to conduct the interview, e.g., in person or online. I will ensure confidentiality and anonymity of their data.

Observation

Informed consent will be sought from teachers, and parents of target students. The Headteacher can give consent for the observation to take place and then parents of other students in the class have the opportunity to opt out. All participants will also be reminded in the participation information sheet that they can withdraw consent at any time.

I will take a marginal participant observer position whereby I will be primarily maintaining an observational stance but may be partially involved in some activities by asking clarifying questions to the young person or adult. This positioning will allow me to make objective observations and minimal disruption to on the students/teacher interactions and student's learning and teaching.

I am aware that my presence may impact the natural setting, for example, students may interact with me. If this occurs, I will talk to them but will not become engaged in conversation or the classroom activities to minimise any disruption or influence behaviour.

My positioning as a researcher in observation versus clinician allows me to observe and analyse phenomena to generate new knowledge or insights. It will allow me to maintain objectivity, minimising personal biases.

Please confirm that the processing of the data is not likely to cause substantial damage or distress to an individual

Yes ☒

Section 9 – Attachments.

Please attach your information sheets and consent forms to your ethics application before requesting a Data Protection number from the UCL Data Protection office. Note that they will be unable to issue you the Data Protection number until all such documentation is received

a. Information sheets, consent forms and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research (List attachments below)
   Yes ☒ No ☐
   Enter text

b. Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee Yes ☐
c. The proposal ('case for support') for the project Yes ☐

d. Full risk assessment Yes ☐

Attachments:

Appendix A – Observation Schedule

Appendix B – Draft Interview Schedule for Individual Students

Appendix C - Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale

Appendix D – Draft Interview Schedule for Teaching Staff

Appendix E – Participant Information Sheets and Consent forms (attached to email)

1. Participant information sheet (Headteacher)
2. Participant information sheet (Teaching and Support Staff from the SRP)
3. Participant information sheet (Teachers from the mainstream)
4. Participant information sheet (Parents/carers of Research Group)
5. Participant information sheet (Parents/carers young people taking part in interviews and observations)
6. Participant information sheet (Young people – Interviews and observations)
7. Participant information sheet (Young people – Research Group)
8. Consent form (Headteacher)
9. Consent form (Teachers and Support Staff)
10. Consent form (Parents/carers)
11. Information Sheet and opt out consent form for parents of non-target students present during observations

Section 10 – Declaration

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge the information in this form is correct and that this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of this project.

I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.
Yes ☒ No ☐

I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.
Yes ☒ No ☐

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:

The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Name Lisa Sheridan

Date 28.05.24

Please submit your completed ethics forms to your supervisor for review.

Notes and references

Professional code of ethics
You should read and understand relevant ethics guidelines, for example:
British Psychological Society (2018) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*
Or
British Educational Research Association (2018) *Ethical Guidelines*
Or
British Sociological Association (2017) *Statement of Ethical Practice*
Please see the respective websites for these or later versions; direct links to the latest versions are available on the Institute of Education Research Ethics website.

Disclosure and Barring Service checks

If you are planning to carry out research in regulated Education environments such as Schools, or if your research will bring you into contact with children and young people (under the age of 18), you will need to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) CHECK, before you start. The DBS was previously known as the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). If you do not already hold a current DBS check, and have not registered with the DBS update service, you will need to obtain one through at IOE.

Ensure that you apply for the DBS check in plenty of time as will take around 4 weeks, though can take longer depending on the circumstances.

Further references

Robson, Colin (2011). *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers* (3rd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.
This text has a helpful section on ethical considerations.

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook.* London: Sage.
This text has useful suggestions if you are conducting research with children and young people.

Wiles, R. (2013) What are Qualitative Research Ethics? Bloomsbury.
A useful and short text covering areas including informed consent, approaches to research ethics including examples of ethical dilemmas.

Departmental Use

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, the supervisor must refer the application to the Research Development Administrator via email so that it can be submitted to the IOE Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A departmental research ethics coordinator or representative can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the REC. If unsure please refer to the guidelines explaining when to refer the ethics application to the IOE Research Ethics Committee, posted on the committee's website.

Student name: Lisa Sheridan

Student department: Psychology and Human Development

Course: DEdPsy

Project Title: Exploring how Specially Resourced Provisions in mainstream secondary schools support the inclusion of young people with SEND.

Reviewer 1

Supervisor/first reviewer name:

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research? I think in the revisions, you have addressed the relevant issues. One thing is you did not consider the Mental

Capacity Act issues etc – I think its OK not to discuss in depth but you should add a statement in section 8 on this as we discussed ie if any doubts 16 or older re capacity you would carefully discuss with teachers as to whether there is capacity and if doubts not include. I don't need to see this again.

Supervisor/first reviewer signature:

Date: 28.5.34

Reviewer 2

Second reviewer name:

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research? No

Second reviewer signature:

Date: 29.5.2024

Decision on behalf of reviewers

Approved X as above ☐

Approved subject to the following additional measures ☐

Not approved for the reasons given below ☐

Referred to the REC for review ☐

Points to be noted by other reviewers and in report to REC:

Comments from reviewers for the applicant:

Once it is approved by both reviewers, students should submit their ethics application form to the Centre for Doctoral Education team: IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk.

Appendix O: Ethics Related to this Study

Informed Consent

Headteachers received an information sheet and gave written consent to opt into the study. Parental consent was sought for the students participating in the interviews and observations, and the planning stage of the study (Research Group) by providing parents and carers with a participant information sheet and opt in consent form. Parents and carers were made aware of the purpose and procedure of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. The pupils' assent was obtained by the researcher with a participant information sheet and consent form whereby they were asked for written assent. The pupils were also be asked for verbal consent to confirm participation ahead of the Research Group stage and individual interviews. Informed consent was sought from the teachers participating in interviews. At the start of the interviews, I informed participants that their data would be kept confidential and that they could withdraw their consent at any time.

For classroom observations, informed consent was sought from teachers, and parents of target students. The Headteacher gave consent for the observations to take place and parents of other students in the class had the opportunity to opt out through school sending an information sheet to all parents with the option to opt out. All participants were also reminded in the participation information sheet that they could withdraw consent at any time.

For students aged 16 or older, I carefully discussed with their teachers regarding their capacity and ability to consent to the study in line with the Mental Capacity Act. If there were any doubts regarding the capacity of students aged 16 to older to consent, they were not included within the study.

Conducting this study involved several gatekeepers including headteacher consent, school staff consent and parental consent. Throughout this process, I maintained transparent regarding the study aims and what it involved from each participant, including highlighting confidentiality, right to withdraw, storage of data and the dissemination of the findings of the study.

Protection from Harm and Duty of Care

When working with young people the power imbalance between the adult researcher and the young people must be recognised and addressed (Mason & Hood, 2011). In addition, the research is centred on exploring autistic students' lived experiences of belonging at school. Research materials including participant information sheets, consent forms and methodological tools were designed to ensure accessibility for autistic young people. The research process has been informed by the Research Group who served as the experts by experience panel who reviewed research tools to give feedback on accessibility and appropriateness, and contributed their perspective based on lived experience.

I emphasised the voluntary nature of the young person's participation in

the research, ensuring they could withdraw at any time without consequences. I made sure the interview location and environment was safe and comfortable for the young people, by interviewing them in a familiar or safe space and having the option to have a trusted adult in the room if required. To minimise any distress, I spoke with the young people's teachers about how the individual might need questions and activities mediated, e.g., breaking down questions, visuals, fidget toys, movement breaks, and an adult present in room. I spent time with the young people before the interview, playing icebreaker games to build rapport. I ensured I was using age-appropriate language and additional supports such as visual aids where possible. I offered students breaks throughout the interviews.

Despite the positive framing of the interviews, there is the possibility that some of the interview questions or activities may have raised uncomfortable feelings if the students have had negative experiences at school. Discussions with school staff were had to share how the study and interviews may evoke sensitivity for some young people (around the concepts of inclusion and belonging at school). School staff were asked to support young people if needed following interview sessions. If difficulties arose during interviews and the young person became distressed, I would cease the interview and support the young person to find a trusted adult with whom they trust and can debrief.

The young people was told at the start of the interviews, that what they share in the interview will be confidential, but that if they share something that concerns their safety or the safety of someone else, I might need to talk to someone who can help, like another trusted adult to make sure that everyone stays safe and gets the support they need.

I recognise the power relations at play between myself as a doctoral researcher and TEP, and the teachers I am interviewing. I considered the importance of rapport building at the start of the interview and being clear about the voluntary nature of their participation. I shared the clear objectives of the research and avoided jargon language. I offered flexibility in how the teacher would like to conduct the interview, e.g., in person or online. I ensured confidentiality and anonymity of their data.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

All identifying information was anonymised by changing participant names to pseudonyms s no individual was identifiable throughout the study. Participants' names and identities were not revealed in the analysis and report of the study findings. All data was handled in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines and stored securely on UCL's cloud storage.

Appendix P: Extended Theme Descriptions

Theme Name	Theme Description	Subtheme Name	Subtheme Description
Navigating Barriers to Inclusion in Mainstream Schools	This theme captures the tensions between efforts at inclusion for students attending SRPs and the barriers that impact the students' experiences within the mainstream.	Accessibility of Mainstream Environment	This subtheme explores the contextual challenges within mainstream schools that can limit students' access to inclusion.
		Role of Teachers and TAs in Academic Inclusion	This subtheme explores the important role of teachers and TAs in the inclusion of students from the SRP.
		School Structures and Practices that Hinder Inclusion	This subtheme refers to the mainstream school structures, policies, and resulting practices that can unintentionally create barriers for students attending the SRP. This includes pressures, impacts of ability grouping, school policies and systemic factors.
		From Training to Practice: Perceived Readiness for Inclusion	This subtheme explores how teachers perceive the training they have received for teaching students with SEND, particularly students from the SRP who may present with complex needs.
More Than a Space: The Base as a Haven for Support, Identity and Connection	This theme highlights the multi-functionality of SRPs and its role beyond a separate space for students with SEND.	Base as a Space for Emotional Containment and Growth	This subtheme represents the value of SRPs as a space for containment and safety for students.
		Personalised Pathways: Academic Support and Adaptation	This subtheme explores the academic support provided for students within the SRP which has an emphasis on an individualised approach.
Bridges to Belonging: Relationships that Shape Inclusion	This theme highlights the role of relationships across the school context that can support, facilitate	'Someone for Everyone in the Base': Friendships and Social Connections	This subtheme explores the function of the SRP in facilitating connections among students with shared experiences. It highlights how the SRP serves as a supportive environment where students can develop social confidence, build

	and hinder the inclusion of students attending the SRP. This theme begins to explore how belonging emerges from relationships and connections with others.		friendships and start to establish a sense of belonging within the SRP.
		Social Inclusion in Mainstream	This subtheme relates to social inclusion in the mainstream including the strengths and challenges and perceived importance associated with this.
		Adult Relationships that Anchor Student Experience	This subtheme relates to the role of teachers and support staff relationships and interactions in fostering a sense of belonging for students within the SRP. It focuses on how these relationships play a central role in students' experience, exploring both the strengths and challenges.
Negotiating Dual Identities	This theme captures how students navigate within the two educational environments, the SRP and the mainstream, negotiating their identities between these distinct settings. It explores how a lack of neurodiversity awareness contributes to misunderstanding and exclusion, highlighting the need for greater recognition of the SRPs in the wider school.	Development of Identity and Self-Perception as a 'Base Student'	This subtheme explores how students from the SRP construct their identity which is complicated by the need to navigate different social expectations within the SRP and mainstream settings, with some students masking aspects of their identity in mainstream spaces.
		Navigating Visible Difference: The Impact of Stigma and 'Othering'	This subtheme explores how the base identity is seen as a marker of difference that often leads to social stigma, othering and bullying by mainstream peers, impacting on students' experiences and engagement at school.
		Awareness of Neurodiversity to Cultivate Understanding	This subtheme highlights the need for greater awareness and understanding of autism and the SRP to support inclusion.

The Dynamic and Contextual Nature of Belonging	This theme encapsulates how belonging is not a fixed state but an evolving process. Students experience belonging as dynamic and can be shaped by relationships, time, individual experiences, and shifts across different environments.	Belonging as a Multidimensional Experience	This subtheme relates to how belonging was experienced and understood by the students in the SRP. As students described belonging experiences, their sense of belonging appeared to emerge from other factors and concepts identified within the wider belonging literature, including emotional experiences, connection, acceptance, engagement and relationships.
		Negotiating Belonging Across Contexts	This subtheme relates to how belonging can be experienced differently among varying contexts, with students experiencing complex dynamics between the SRP and mainstream school environments. The SRP can provide a sense of connection, safety and shared identity, while belonging in mainstream settings can be more challenging, requiring students to navigate differing expectations, peer dynamics, and institutional structures that may either foster or hinder their sense of inclusion.
		The Changing Nature of Belonging Over Time	This subtheme outlines how belonging is not a fixed state but a fluid and evolving experience that shifts as students develop relationships, identity and perceptions over time. Over time, students may develop a stronger sense of identity and gain confidence in their social interactions, which leads to a greater sense of belonging to the school community.