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Happier on the outside? Discourses of exclusion, disempowerment and belonging from former autistic school staff

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Abstract

Autistic individuals can have poor outcomes from school, including high rates of unemployment. Despite a growing focus on the work experiences of autistic people, and various approaches to remediate the difficulties they undergo, the school sector remains largely unexplored, as are the insights available from former autistic employees. In a discourse analysis of 12 former autistic school staff previously in a range of roles in the UK, the multiple and intersecting issues they experienced are analysed. These reveal different forms of marginalisation, disempowerment, invisibility and exclusion at play, including in relation to being autistic, before the final departure. However, participant discourses also demonstrate important autistic aptitudes of particular benefit to pupils at risk of marginalisation themselves, and provide insights into how autistic staff—including visiting professionals—can be better supported in the school sector in the future. Such steps could provide significant benefits for the education field generally, especially in relation to the inclusion of autistic and otherwise neurodivergent pupils.

KEYWORDS
autism, autistic teachers, disabled teachers, employment, exclusion, neurodiversity

Key points

- By analysing the language of former autistic school staff in this sample, it was revealed that they had experienced different forms of exclusion and marginalisation when working in schools.
- Not all participants knew that they were autistic when working in schools. Those who did had mixed experiences of telling others they were autistic.
- Participants felt they had autism-specific strengths they had brought to their work, including a non-hierarchical approach to interacting with pupils. These strengths could be of benefit to pupils at risk of exclusion themselves.
- Participants were still experiencing some liminality after leaving schools, but this was often on their own terms and they were broadly happy with their current circumstances. Providing autistic-led training was considered essential to improving understanding and support for autistic school staff.

INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that autistic people receive lower pay, are subject to greater job insecurity and higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than the general population (Burgess & Cimera, 2014; Eaves & Ho, 2007; Hendricks, 2010; Maslahati et al., 2022; Solomon, 2020; Taylor et al., 2015) and other disability groups (Office

for National Statistics, 2021; Roux et al., 2013; Scott et al., 2017). The reasons for this are complex and include poor outcomes from school (Wilczynski et al., 2013), issues with travel, the processes of job applications and interviews, the negative sensory effects of work environments and communication and social differences (Feinstein, 2019; Lorenz et al., 2016; Nicholas et al., 2018; Raymaker et al., 2020; Sarrett, 2017). Black autistic young people can be particularly subject to low employment rates, an issue underexplored in the literature (Malone et al., 2022). Further complexities are associated with sharing a diagnosis of autism with managers and colleagues (Martin et al., 2019; Romualdez et al., 2021; Vincent, 2020). More broadly, access to education, training and professional opportunities are not always provided to autistic individuals in alignment with equality legislation and disability rights (Della Fina & Cera, 2015).

Approaches to facilitate the employment of autistic people include a range of school transition, job application, employment retention and mentoring schemes (Booth, 2014; Nicholas et al., 2018; Wilczynski et al., 2013), supported employment programmes (Flower et al., 2019; Nicholas & Lau, 2019) and behaviourist interventions (Montgomery et al., 2011; Wehman et al., 2017). Schemes for employers to understand how to hire and retain autistic employees include strategies to address anxieties, such as imagined additional costs, that employers might have (Mavranezouli et al., 2014; Scott et al., 2017; Solomon, 2020). Some companies, such as Deutsche Bank, run internship programmes for autistic people that report positive outcomes like extended contracts (Remington & Pellicano, 2019). However, there are concerns that even within sectors that have developed constructive, strengths-based programmes, there is a failure to address the heterogenous and intersectional nature of the autistic population, as reported by Doyle et al. (2022) following a global online survey.

Moreover, profession-specific research, beyond that of office or tech environments, on the experiences of autistic employees remains limited. This is despite a growing awareness of the experiences of autistic doctors (Doherty et al., 2021; McCowan et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2022), lawyers (Kim, 2019) and police officers (National Police Autism Association, 2023). In the education field, there has been some research into autistic academics in the UK (Martin, 2021) and internationally (Jones, 2022), as well as teachers with disabilities in further and higher education settings (Brewster et al., 2017; Burns & Bell, 2010). The experiences of schoolteachers with disabilities such as dyslexia (Oberholzer, 2017; Riddick, 2003), learning disabilities (Valle et al., 2004; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011) and motor, sensory and health impairments (Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019) have also been explored, and important statistical findings on disability have been provided from the initial teacher education stage in the republic of Ireland (Keane et al., 2018). This field of study increasingly extends beyond the global north, broadening our understanding of disabled educators and the barriers they face, such as prejudice, stigma and inadequate accommodations and support (Aldakhil, 2020; Neca et al., 2020; Singal & Ware, 2021). Furthermore, research into teachers with disabilities presents important indicators of the benefits of disabled educators for pupils with disabilities, amongst other advantages, as identified in their review by Neca et al. (2020).

Research into autistic teachers remains limited, although earlier iterations of the study discussed here reveal several issues with sensory impacts, sharing an autism diagnosis, social and communication complexities, as well as important contributions to educational inclusion manifested by autistic school staff (Wood et al., 2022; Wood & Happé, 2021). Crucially, these studies showed that autistic staff who are not suitably supported may be denied professional opportunities, might avoid promotion opportunities, reduce their working hours and even leave the school sector altogether, thus aligning with broader research into the uneven employment experiences of autistic people. Stressors at work are also considered to contribute to autistic burnout (Mantzalas et al., 2022), while communication differences can also be a factor in job retention for autistic employees (Scott et al., 2015). Given the unique nature of the school environment, these circumstances suggest the school sector would benefit from profession-specific analysis on the experiences of former autistic employees and to learn lessons from this, an issue addressed in the article.

Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis (DA) is a broad term that encompasses a range of analytical approaches consisting of 'the close study of language in use' within social contexts (Taylor, 2001, p. 5) and includes Conversation Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Foucauldian Analysis, amongst other methods (Lester & O'Reilly, 2016; Wetherell et al., 2001). Moreover, in its focus on 'discourse as a fluid, shifting medium in which meaning is created and contested' (Taylor, 2001, p. 9), DA has some similarities and overlaps with other linguistic analytical disciplines such as stylistics and literary criticism (Abdulmughni, 2019). Importantly, DA, and especially CDA, can be concerned with inequalities and power relationships, and explore how personal, social and professional identities are negotiated linguistically and semiotically, especially in marginalised populations (Fairclough, 2001).

In the disability context, there has been a necessary focus on discourses *about* disability which, it is posited, can create and sustain disadvantage for marginalised groups through being 'causally located' within medicalised, impairment-focused organisations and concomitant

descriptions (Grue, 2011, p. 541). DA has therefore been fruitfully applied to deconstruct unhelpful stereotypes about autism (Jones & Harwood, 2009; Lester, 2016; O'Reilly et al., 2016), in line with a growing awareness that such language can not only perpetuate stigma, but generate it too (Botha et al., 2020; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021), even if there remains a lack of consensus on this subject internationally (Amaral, 2023; Buijsman et al., 2023; Geelhand et al., 2023; Keating et al., 2023). In the education field, DA has been employed to demonstrate the damaging impact of unhelpful narratives about disability in teacher training and pedagogical materials (Shume, 2020; Stamou & Padeliadu, 2009), and to elicit insights from Teaching Assistants (TAs) into power relations (Lehane, 2016). For Shume (2020), understanding and deconstructing such discourses are 'fundamental to comprehending sources of bias, stigma, and prejudice resulting in discrimination against people with disabilities' (p. 12).

Moreover, DA can be fruitfully applied to narratives *from* disabled people to counter stigmatising discourses (Davidson, 2010), because 'meaning exists within and is constructed through the linguistic structures with which a culture communicates' (Scior, 2003, p. 780). Maciejewska (2019) found that conducting a DA of the communication of autistic teenagers could result in 'both empowering them and changing the perspective in research' (p. 303) and so 'shift the focus from deficits to abilities' (p. 313). Similarly, Davidson (2010), through a CDA of 45 autobiographies of autistic people, argues that such an approach can support a drive to 're-conceptualize real difference in terms other than deviancy or deficit' (p. 311). Therefore, this analysis is predicated on the understanding that if issues of stigma and marginalisation experienced by the autistic community are to be addressed (Botha, 2021; Milton, 2014), particular understandings and insights should be derived directly from autistic discourses.

The research questions for this study are as follows:

What are the work experiences of former autistic school staff?
What particular insights can be provided through an analysis of the language they use to describe their experiences?
What lessons can be learned from this analysis to enable better experiences for autistic school staff and neurodiverse pupils?

METHODS

This interpretative, qualitative and iterative study derived from a social constructionist epistemology provides that realities within social contexts are created by and negotiated through language (Lester & O'Reilly, 2016; O'Reilly et al., 2016). Predicated on principles of disability rights and inclusion (Della Fina & Cera, 2015; Lim, 2020), this study is informed by a neurodiversity and social model of disability framework that posits an assumption of cogency in relation to its subjects (den Houting, 2019). Developed iteratively from an earlier phase of the same study consisting of an anonymous online survey in the UK ($n = 149$ participants) for autistic school staff and co-developed with a committee of autistic teachers, the findings in this paper are drawn from $n = 12$ of those survey participants no longer working in a school at the time of the interview who had agreed, by providing an email address for future contact, to take part in an in-depth, semi-structured interview. Ethical review was conducted by the researcher's university. All participants were provided with a 15 pound thank you voucher.

Participants could select interview by email or on a one-to-one basis, via phone or Microsoft Teams, with a high degree of flexibility offered in terms of timing and breaks if needed. This resulted in $n = 8$ one-to-one interviews and $n = 4$ by email. Interview questions were provided to one-to-one interviewees in advance: interviews were recorded and transcribed via transcription software.

To protect participants' identities in this small sample ($n = 12$), some aspects of participant characteristics are summarised here. There were nine females, two males and one participant who identified as nonbinary. Ten had received a clinical diagnosis of autism, and two were seeking or awaiting diagnosis. Data were not collected on race and ethnicity, although one participant shared her experiences as a black school staff member. Participants ranged in age from 26 and 63 and had worked in schools between 6 months and 31 years. Participants' former roles were varied and had changed over time. They included teacher; therapeutic and/or visiting professional; senior leadership, volunteer and teaching assistant (TA, $n = 7$). Participants had worked across a range of settings, including mainstream schools, special schools and pupil referral units, an autism resource base, an alternative, play-based provision and a residential setting.

Data were analysed via a 'traditional' DA method (Lester & O'Reilly, 2016) and guided by insights on linguistic analysis provided by Wetherell et al. (2001). The process was additionally informed by CDA, especially in its more emancipatory elements, the attention paid to power relations (Fairclough, 2015) and the focus on discourses by disabled participants 'as constructed in their own talk' (Scior, 2003, p. 780). The analysis was also underpinned by a consideration of the broader social practices within which participants were situated, namely schools in the UK, which have particular social and, by extension, discursive characteristics not necessarily evident in other work environments (O'Reilly et al., 2016; Taylor, 2001).

There is no 'universal recipe' for DA (Lehane, 2016, p. 9), nor does the process necessarily entail specific

'steps' (Lester & O'Reilly, 2016). For this study, multiple readings of the full interviews were initially undertaken to identify 'recurring elements in the body of talk' (Taylor, 2001, p. 15), enabling the gradual identification of emergent groupings and patterns through a constant comparison approach. Key overlapping and intersecting tropes and motifs relating to how participants represented their time in schools discursively were identified. These have been grouped into four, interlinked categories and sub-categories:

1. Marginalisation
   - Physical exclusions
   - (Not) being part of a team
   - Professional liminality and uncertainty
   - School structures and systems
2. Being Autistic
   - Not knowing, not always showing or telling
   - Autistic advantage
3. Present and Future Positives
   - Happiness on the outside
   - From the outside in

RESULTS

Marginalisation

Physical exclusions

Participants' descriptions of loud bells, noisy classrooms, odours from lunchtime, PE kits and the toilets, the impact of strip lights and the sun pouring through large windows with no blinds, and high viz jackets, revealed their multi-modal and exclusionary effects. These might cause 'pain', 'raised heartbeat', and dizziness and tiredness, could be 'overwhelming and distracting', 'would turn your stomach' and create 'overload'. Similarly, crowding in corridors and staff meetings, as well as quieter impacts such as children whispering or scraping their chairs during 'silent' activities, the 'sharp noises of whiteboard pens on the board', were 'hated', created a sense of 'dread', made it hard to concentrate, to process language, to interact with colleagues, and so 'function at full capacity'. Sensations of fear, chaos and oppression could be generated, with the sensory onslaught described as 'intimidating', 'horrific', 'crazy', 'mad' and 'chaotic', and the school feeling 'like a prison'. Such issues could also cause 'embarrassment and humiliation' when colleagues failed to understand protective actions such as avoiding a crowd of children.

The steps participants took to tackle the sensory oppression they experienced revealed further motifs of marginalisation. Participants could avoid certain school spaces, such as the staffroom, a 'dreadful place' of 'struggle' where, during meetings, 'the people couldn't fit in and if you stood in the doorway there were still people trying to press in'. Other places, such as the assembly hall, or rooms where training could be taking place, were also experienced as oppressive and 'uncomfortable, hot', where 'the people would be talking while there was training going on, and you just couldn't concentrate'. Some areas of the school became 'no go', as one TA stated bluntly that she 'never went into the dinner hall'. Another participant had simply left some jobs 'because they were just too much' from a sensory point of view.

Other measures taken to cope with the sensory oppression reveal tropes of withdrawal, escape and even invisibility. Participants might find 'ways to leave the classroom' or seek opportunities to work outdoors or with small groups. Going for a walk somewhere quiet could enable participants to escape the sense of chaos and 'realign' their senses. In these situations, motifs of repression are replaced by expressions of openness: 'if the door was shut, it was always me (…) who opened it', as one participant commented. Indeed, for another participant, it is also important to help children to 'see healthy relational openness'. Occasionally, colleagues were understanding and supportive of these coping strategies, but it could also mean 'getting pulled up for disappearing'.

If participants had their own classroom or their own office, they could either control their own sensory environment or temporarily withdraw. In these circumstances, instead of being subject to sensory chaos and oppression, tropes of security and well-being suggest the positive effects, as participants were able to 'switch off', feel 'comfortable' and 'protected' for a short time.

(Not) being part of a team

The sensory impacts of the school environment contributed to difficulties participants experienced in making social connections, thus adding further tropes of exclusion already expressed. In particular, events with a predominant or purely social aim, such as staff outings, were described as either avoided altogether, or engaged with out of a sense of obligation, to 'maintain professional relationships' and be perceived as a 'team player'. However, rather than togetherness, these events revealed motifs of alienation, being experienced as deeply unpleasant and even hellish, described as 'horrible', a 'massive struggle', a 'nightmare', or 'purgatory'. Taking steps of avoidance or withdrawal to manage these feelings could lead to accusations of 'being antisocial' and 'not being a team player'. Moreover, staff social activities were perceived as being experienced entirely differently by colleagues, who might be 'raving about' the event the next day, and so aggravating a sense of disconnectedness for participants. Other social activities within school, such as sports events and class parties, outside of the usual timetable, could generate feelings of bewilderment, as

the autistic staff member 'didn't know what was going to happen during these events'. Therefore, while some participant discourses revealed that they could feel displaced and marginalised during the usual school day, stepping outside of the school routine could be experienced as even more disorientating.

Tropes of alienation and disconnectedness also underpin descriptions of daily relationships and communication in school. Some participants felt excluded due to 'cliquey-ness' and a sense that they 'didn't fit in with' their work colleagues who, it was considered, might perceive the autistic staff member as 'weird', or even 'mad'. Participants could feel 'lonely and alienated', or experience being left out of conversations. Engagement with colleagues was sometimes a 'struggle', especially when there was a reliance on 'small talk' as a communication mode, considered 'inane'. Instead, being 'clear and direct', 'honest and truthful', as might be valued by an autistic staff member, could be perceived as 'an affront' and 'challenging' to non-autistic colleagues. 'Not understanding social interactions as quickly as others' was considered disadvantageous, as was a difficulty reading body language and making sense of 'implicit verbal instructions'. This could mean that social interactions in school were 'tough' and underscored by feelings of 'awkwardness and anxiety'.

Moreover, one of the participants who had had senior roles in schools commented that 'teaching assistants are often invisible to teachers', and that he had observed that during a school day, 'not one teacher greeted the TA'. A former TA also felt there had been a 'complete lack of recognition from teachers'. This further expression of invisibility suggests that autistic teaching assistants might be at particular risk of social exclusion, due to the nature of their role and how colleagues interact with them. One participant felt that children who typically find it difficult to attend school can also be at risk of being ignored, as they are often 'invisible'.

Nevertheless, some participants had had occasional positive experiences of staff relations, and here, narratives of understanding and belonging contrast with the tropes of alienation and disconnection that often underpinned participants' discourses. For instance, 'really supportive line managers' might provide 'reasonable adjustments' without being asked, but simply because they 'sensed something'. One teacher had worked with a Headteacher who communicated in a way that was 'very direct', enabling her to feel 'safe'. Being 'heard', being thanked and provided with flexibility, understanding and even friendship, as well as experiencing 'respect and appreciation' enabled some participants to develop a sense of belonging and progress professionally. Moreover, some participants considered that understanding colleagues had possibly experienced marginalisation themselves, either through being neurodivergent, as a person of colour, or both.

Professional liminality and uncertainty

The blunt language of participants' discourses and tropes of exclusion reflected feelings of professional liminality and the associated sense of uncertainty generated. Former TAs cited insecure contracts and low pay as reasons for leaving the profession, as 'budget cuts' and 'the threat of redundancies and cut in hours were always there', creating a sense that 'they could get rid of us quite easily'. Some participants therefore felt dispensable, at risk of 'cuts', experienced as 'really stressful'. Another TA had received 'a couple of written warnings', and so had felt in danger of being imminently expelled. Even when through choice, departure from a job could be equally abrupt, such as an autistic staff member announcing, 'I'm packing this in', to the Headteacher, or cutting ties completely as 'a bridge-burning operation (…) I've usually walked out'.

Participants expressed how insecure work could engender further professional marginalisation, as being 'temporary' meant there was no 'training budget'. Even when available, training might be inaccessible for participants due to sensory overload, operating 'on a neurotypical model', not taking account of learning differences, or the social anxiety generated: 'I didn't know anyone at all and needed to talk'. Participants complained of indirect exclusion from promotion opportunities, perhaps due to not 'knowing that the position was available' or 'having a chance to apply'. Some of the TAs would have liked to train to become teachers but, despite being 'greatly encouraged', 'never felt supported in the right way'. For one TA, this circumstance results from a profession that 'promotes ableism' in its 'ideal of what a teacher should be'. A teacher had moved from job to job, often leaving after a few months due to high levels of fatigue and distress. These intersecting discourses of peripherality and insecurity were not only factors in participants' departure from the profession, underscoring the accumulative effects of multiple exclusionary elements, but contrasted with descriptions of having 'a lot to offer' and being 'valuable'. Moreover, participants considered that this peripherality also applied to some of the pupils they had worked with, including those from a refugee or asylum-seeker background, black and minority ethnic communities and single-parent families, suggesting a complex interweaving of professional and pupil peripherality in the school sector (Lehane, 2016).

School structures and systems

Participants' experiences of disconnectedness could be exacerbated by concerns about the hierarchical nature of schools, revealed in tropes of authoritarianism, as they were described as 'militarised' because of the 'rules for the sake of having rules', the 'dominance', even 'dictatorship' of the leadership team, who might 'think

they're important just because of their job title'. These circumstances, such as a dress code for staff, engendered further feelings of being in opposition to the status quo. This might lead to 'conflict', expressed though motifs of affective disjuncture, such as 'struggle', 'traumatic', 'exhausting', 'draining' and 'burnout'.

Individuality and autonomy were described as being under threat, leading to a further concern that 'when you strip away the individuality of teachers, you strip that away from children'. For a TA, departure from the education system was triggered by the fact that it was 'becoming more and more tighter and controlling', replacing the 'creativity' of 'off-the-cuff teaching'.

The work of TAs which, as we have seen, could be underpinned by a sense of insecurity, might be further impacted by being excluded from knowledge that affected them directly, as revealed in expressions of uncertainty and disempowerment. For example, 'the uncertainty of not knowing' how many hours they were expected to undertake, or whether they would suddenly be moved to work with unfamiliar children or colleagues, created a sense of disenfranchisement and 'anxiety' or 'worry'. New activities could be imposed without warning or discussion:

> Our timetable could change every day (…), so you didn't always know where you'd be, so that would be really stressful, not really knowing who you'd be working with.

More broadly, it was considered that national changes to the role of the TA were introduced without consultation or the necessary training:

> We went from mixing paint, hearing reading, we used to make tea and coffee for the staff on duty, we used to do displays, you know, general classroom stuff (…). Suddenly we had a group of up to eight children, for literacy and numeracy every day.

The fact that the curriculum 'was constantly being tinkered with and rewritten' was also a 'struggle', changes in instructions were found to be 'tough', as was the fact that a TA's schedule might only be revealed at the start of the school year. Similarly, school trips or external training events could be 'sprung on you at the last minute', meaning that 'you just constantly felt like the floor was unstable under your feet'. One TA returned from maternity leave to find that her job 'had changed completely', without any prior warning or consultation, including no longer working with a supportive colleague who had recognised her need for breaks, and so she only lasted 'till lunchtime'.

Other participant discourses also revealed the disorientating impacts of 'last minute changes', the fact that

'everything changed all the time' and that there 'were always, always new things coming', found to be 'very difficult'. Notwithstanding feelings of oppression and a sense of dictatorship within schools, being suddenly expected to depart from existing rules could trigger feelings of confusion, 'because I had a plan in my head and then I didn't know what to do anymore'. Similarly, being 'pressurised into doing things I felt broke rules' were 'hated' and could place participants at odds with their colleagues, contributing to motifs of emotional separation and alienation from them. One participant's need for 'routine' would seemingly 'annoy' non-autistic colleagues. Moreover, if an autistic staff member tried to bring about their own changes, or 'disrupt' the usual processes, 'that becomes a huge deal and a huge problem', because 'no-one listens', it was considered. In these ways, tropes revealing a lack of agency in an atmosphere of frequent change were shown to have impacted negatively on participants' well-being in schools.

By contrast, motifs suggesting a more egalitarian attitude, such as working directly with individual children 'down on the floor', getting 'down to their level' and providing 'autonomy' reflect a preferred approach by some participants. One participant stated that he preferred to be 'equal' with children, to 'kneel down on the floor and talk to them face-to-face', and not 'do the disciplinary'. This participant asserted that although successful, the Headteacher had 'tried to ban' this approach, contributing ultimately to his departure from the education profession 'because of management conflict and education authority conflict'. Therefore, participant discourses of exclusion are further underscored due to an expectation of authoritarianism in relation to pupils, or a sense of being dictated to by the school and broader education sector hierarchies.

Being autistic

Not knowing, not always showing or telling

Only five of the 12 participants knew that they were autistic while working in schools, with a further two learning of this towards the end of their school careers. This de facto exclusion from self-knowledge is revealed in further motifs of disconnection and uncertainty, as participants reflected that they had not known to seek 'reasonable adjustments' that could have enabled them to stay in the profession, nor understood sometimes 'what was going on' or how to navigate communication from colleagues:

> If I'd known then what I know now I would have asked people to be clearer about what they were expecting from me, because sometimes I couldn't always see what (…) they were looking for.

For one participant, not having a diagnosis also intersected with difficulties stemming from 'being a black woman in an environment', while another participant had spent his entire life 'trying not to appear to have any flaws' as a result, he considered, of not knowing that he was autistic.

Even participants who already knew they were autistic did not always want to disclose this information to colleagues, either verbally or through their actions, thus reinforcing tropes of invisibility already expressed. Masking—the concealment of an autistic identity—can be associated with significant mental health difficulties for autistic people and might occur whether or not an individual knows they are autistic, can be voluntary, involuntary, or even imposed (Pearson & Rose, 2021).

For example, a teacher felt that she had 'a positive sense of self' and was willing to 'share freely' the fact of being autistic, but asserted that 'headteachers have often requested that I don't share I am autistic with parent(s)/carers(s)'. This made her feel 'sad' that she had to hide her identity 'as an achieving autistic teacher' from parents, and so potentially forcing her to be complicit in the negative narratives about autism in school. Another participant felt she had to supress her natural facial expressions, such as 'having to smile all the time' due to being 'challenged when my face was neutral because I was thinking'. A TA realised in retrospect that she was 'masking all the time', a process that was 'exhausting', but felt necessary because her 'fidgeting' had already become 'a bit of a joke' with colleagues.

A key factor in choosing not to disclose was the 'stereotyped and pathological' language employed by colleagues when discussing autism in relation to pupils, considered 'poor' and 'weak', and enabling 'people in positions of power' to propagate 'discrimination'. Indeed, autism training, it was considered, could generate untruths, 'spread myths and misinformation' about autism by suggesting that 'being competent and being autistic are not compatible', and so 'limit us'. Consequently, a teacher considered that she had no option but to 'camouflage' in order to 'come across as a very confident, knowledgeable educator without any difficulties'. 'There is no way I could be myself', she stated, a process that was 'awful' and 'hated', as 'it often felt like there were two of me'. Therefore 'consciously' masking, trying to 'come off as neurotypical' were self-protective measures for participants, born from a fear 'of how people might react' and a need for 'self-preservation'. Limited understanding of autism might mean that 'they wouldn't understand what it meant' when help was requested, 'you're going to expose yourself' and that 'competence' would be questioned. In these ways, participants expressed how they felt it necessary to hide their true identity and natural ways of being, as disclosure could cause their abilities to be obscured.

One participant had felt she had no choice but to disclose as 'my autism is not very invisible'. However, although colleagues 'seemed to respond well', she was 'in the lowest paid job of the school', she commented. For another participant, disclosing being autistic 'almost made things worse' as her manager 'started introducing things that I would need to be flexible over – it was almost like she was testing me', while another participant was simply not believed. Therefore, disclosing being autistic did not always improve the issues of invisibility and disempowerment already expressed, and might even make them worse. Nonetheless, one participant had experienced 'a positive response (…) that helped a lot'. Moreover, another participant stated that she 'became good at managing and masking not at great cost to me'.

Overall, however, participant discourses reveal how they could be effectively silenced or rendered invisible by the stigmatising or ill-informed language of others within the school hierarchy, feeling unable to disclose to the school management team, or doing so with a small number of colleagues only. Moreover, being open and visibly autistic could bring some 'benefits', it was considered, but was also described as an uncertain process that engendered risk.

Autistic advantage

Participants considered that they were able to bring a number of advantages to their work by dint of being autistic. Here, in contrast to motifs of struggle, conflict, disconnection and marginalisation expressed in relation to other aspects of their professional experiences, participants employed tropes of belonging, understanding, love and a positive conceptualisation of difference, sometimes via superlatives, to convey these ideas.

The difficulties participants had experienced in work and during their own education enabled them to feel 'compassion' for and 'relate' to pupils who were finding school a struggle. Participants felt they could 'build rapport', 'get on the page' and 'be connected' with autistic children, due to having 'a deeper understanding', or being part of 'the family of children with additional needs' who are 'kin'. Developing 'familiarity' and deep relationships could be facilitated by the specific roles of the participants, such as being a TA or a therapeutic professional, and communicating using 'coded language that somebody who is autistic' would understand. 'Being able to empathise a lot easier' was considered key, because 'autistic people lend ourselves to being more empathetic to people from marginalised groups, more empathetic to people being different', it was felt.

Seeing pupils progress was 'very important', an activity of 'value', 'a huge privilege' or even 'the most important thing' that could bring 'a sense of joy'. Being with the children was 'loved', found to be 'rewarding', especially 'empowering them and helping them overcome obstacles in their learning'. For one participant, understanding

pupils' needs had motivated her 'the best' she could be. For a teacher, communicating with parents was also enjoyed—'one of my favourite things'—because building good relationships was her 'deep interest'.

In addition, a sense of tackling the job differently, having 'an outside perspective', being able to find 'other approaches', 'a different angle', 'different ways of explaining things', provide an 'alternative way of thinking and teaching', bring 'a fresh set of eyes' and 'think outside the box because we don't exist in a box', were perceived as advantageous in their work. Situations which other teachers 'couldn't manage', an autistic staff member would be able to 'troubleshoot', meaning that pupils who were experiencing marginalisation were helped to be part of the school community. 'Neurotypical teachers', it was asserted, did not vary their approach, 'and if it wasn't working, they just did it more or did it louder'. Autistic school staff can also 'raise awareness and be role models for students', it was felt. This could be through enhanced visibility of difference, such as wearing ear-defenders to protect from noise sensitivity, meaning that pupils would not be afraid to do so themselves if needed. In these ways, tropes of marginalisation are subtly shifted to a positive view of difference and the benefits of outsider insights for neurodiverse pupils and the broader school community.

It was also asserted that 'lots of autistic people are very passionate about education', leading to the development of 'huge knowledge' about the subjects they teach. In these respects, motifs of disconnection from knowledge are replaced by a sense of being a subject expert, leading to 'passion' and 'enthusiasm' which are 'contagious' and 'inspire' children. Other qualities included reliability and tenacity—'if somebody asked me to get the job done (…), it would get done'—and consistency and organisation, an 'adherence to deadlines' and being 'thorough', contrasting with motifs of uncertainty expressed elsewhere. This persistence extended to pupils who were experiencing difficulties in school:

> I never gave up on a child because I think probably too many people gave up on me. I could see myself in a lot of the children.

Therefore, autistic characteristics such as having deep interests and tenacity, as well as the fact of occupying more liminal positions, both professionally and psychologically, brought advantages to the roles participants had held in schools. It was because participants understood exclusion from the school environment, and the conflicts with hierarchy, that they were able to more effectively include and empower pupils who were marginalised and at risk of exclusion themselves. Moreover, supporting children, especially those who were struggling in school, enabled participants to feel valuable in their work, engendered a sense of belonging and kinship, and brought into relief the positive dimensions of being different.

Present and future positives

Happiness on the outside

At the time of their interviews, participants' roles included being a therapist, engaging in postgraduate study or research, conducting training and consultancy on autism, and working as a mentor or SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) advisor. Therefore, participants were not working in traditional employee roles in most cases, and arguably were still experiencing peripherality, albeit through choice. This marginalisation through choice was also expressed by participants in other areas of their lives, such as by choosing to home-educate their own children. One participant would have been happy 'never to go out ever again' during home-working resulting from Covid-19 related measures, she said.

Importantly, most participants expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their current occupations or circumstances. Here, instead of tropes of struggle, disempowerment and alienation, motifs of happiness, agency and belonging are prevalent, sometimes expressed through superlatives and hyperbole. Working life was now 'much, much easier', 'by about a gazillion percent', meaning participants were 'genuinely happy', perhaps for the 'first time' ever in their working lives. As one participant stated, 'I'm finally where I want to be'. Even a participant who asserted that she was experiencing 'poverty', was nevertheless 'the happiest' she had ever been. Participants felt that they were now more easily able to bring their particular aptitudes to the fore, by carrying out their 'best work', finding their 'best way of working' and giving their 'best value' due to being 'very happy'. One participant considered he had 'taken parts out of teaching that I felt really good with' and adapted those to his current work, while another was 'doing less, better'.

A key element of this state of happiness was that participants were now experiencing agency, being in demand for their specific skills, able to work on their own 'terms' and having 'total control' over work schedules. Being provided with flexibility and control meant that a participant actively 'chose' to continue working for one organisation, while another participant valued being 'independent'. This sense of agency is underscored here by the repetition of the pronoun 'I':

> I can now do the work I want to do when I want to do it and (…) fit it in around other things that I want to do.

Similarly, those who were self-employed found that they did not need to deal with the issues of hierarchy:

> …I work with who I want to work with, I talk to who I want to talk to, mostly, I work in my own environment which I control in terms of sensory things.

A former TA had started off doing voluntary work for an organisation, but had been asked to be 'on board' as an employee, thus reversing the processes of exclusion experienced previously. In these ways, some participants found that by removing themselves from the teaching profession, they had paradoxically evolved from outsiders to insiders, while maintaining peripherality on their own terms. Some participants also found that in their current role, they were able to be open about being autistic, having since acquired that knowledge themselves. For one participant, her current employer's 'level of acceptance' is 'brilliant'.

From the outside in

Participants' proposed solutions to address the issues of marginalisation and invisibility they had experienced were expressed via tropes of truthfulness, inclusion, belonging and openness. To counter the 'persistent myths' and misrepresentations considered to obscure the reality of autistic identity, autistic-led training was deemed 'crucial', because 'you only really know autism when you are autistic'. Learning from autistic people—who are the insiders in this context—would enable non-autistic school staff to be aware of 'the vastness of the subject of autism', focus on 'acceptance and the positive aspects of autism' and so facilitate greater inclusion of autistic people in the teaching profession.

Training for autistic educators should also be delivered by autistic people, it was considered. Here, participants expressed a strong sense of autistic community, as underscored by the repetition of the pronoun 'we':

> We need training in a different way, we need the training to develop our skills and the way we can work.

Therefore, 'an autistic trainer who understands that perspective' would be beneficial to train both non-autistic and autistic people in the education sector, it was felt. However, it can be 'hard to get through the door of schools' for autistic people engaged in training and consultancy. Schools should therefore 'get autistic trainers in through the door', or alternatively 'go out and learn from autistic people', suggesting that it is non-autistic people who need to move outside of their current boundaries, both physical and attitudinal, while inviting more autistic people into schools.

Overall, schools should facilitate a greater diversity of staff, it was asserted, in terms of enabling more 'openly' autistic people to 'get into education', as well as more people of colour, and 'bringing in people from all sorts of different backgrounds who exist differently' and 'a whole range of people with different disabilities and differences'. To facilitate this process, 'more autistic people need to come out' and be visible, it was considered, and

so there must be 'an atmosphere where staff are comfortable disclosing disabilities or other difficulties'.

Thus, through their own experiences of marginalisation and invisibility, participants recognised that further marginalities need to be addressed. Moreover, acceptance and belonging were expressed as being achieved through a recognition of autistic difference. Autistic people should not be expected to 'conform to a non-autistic way of thinking', it was asserted, because 'autistic growth and development is not linear'. School leaders should also be 'flexible' and ensure that they identify 'the role that suits the person', rather than forcing an autistic school staff member to 'be in a role that doesn't fit'. For an autistic person 'it's about finding the right niche', because 'if you have a particular interest, you can really thrive in a particular niche'. Above all, it was considered that those in the education field should be more open-minded and 'need to listen', a process that is 'top of the list'. More structural adaptations were also suggested, such as legislative and policy-based changes to support the training and career progression of autistic school staff, as well as a requirement for the provisions of the Equality Act (2010) to be upheld.

The tropes of identity, truthfulness and visibility were also applied to pupils who, 'if they do not see autistic and/or disabled adults with jobs, form preconceptions that should not exist.' It is therefore essential that autistic children 'can see themselves reflected in the diversity of staff', including autistic children of colour so they can 'develop positive black identities', a process that could be further embedded by ensuring that 'autistic school staff (are) part of the education system in every aspect'. In these ways, a broader cultural shift was required, based on 'understanding about neurodiversity and difference' and a willingness to 'celebrate autism as a more regular thing, with black faces too'. Facilitating more blended learning opportunities for neurodiverse pupils were also perceived as beneficial, thus showing a more evolved notion of inclusion, and one that centres on flexibility and choice, rather than the presence inside or outside of a specific building.

Motifs of acceptance of difference were also evident in relation to socialisation and communication. It was felt important not to 'judge autistic employees by the social standards of other staff', and to recognise and accept 'that some human beings are not always super social'. School leaders should also be more cognisant of 'different styles of communication', of colleagues who 'communicate differently to others' and those who require greater clarity in explanations, for example. In addition, there should be greater awareness of 'autistic bluntness' when 'just trying to convey useful information', which can be misinterpreted as 'being critical or insulting'. At the same time, making more time for connections, creating 'more of a dialogue' would be helpful for autistic staff members experiencing difficulties,

it was considered. For TAs in particular, having more open and flexible communication about changes would be highly beneficial, because 'if it's quite rigid and quite fixed and stilted, that communication isn't going to happen'.

DISCUSSION

Through a close analysis of participants' discourses, a complex interweaving of experiences of liminality, invisibility and exclusion are revealed that ultimately played a role in their departure from schools. Repeated and intersecting tropes of disconnectedness, insecurity and disempowerment provide a sense that school was a place of struggle in which autistic identity was either unknown, hidden or misconstrued, in part resulting from the oppressive and stigmatising nature of colleagues' language about autism. This might be inculcated through training about autism, which was not only inaccessible, thus limiting participants' career progression, but further reinforced the invisibility of participants due to its ill-informed nature. These findings underscore the extent to which autistic discourses and ways of being in the world can be suppressed via social, communication and linguistic norms that can unwittingly stigmatise and exclude (Botha et al., 2020; Wood, 2020).

By focusing on the language of participants, it has been possible to expose narratives of oppression, while marginalisation is revealed as a multifarious phenomenon, with several exclusionary factors operating before the final departure. More than half of the sample had worked all or some of the time as teaching assistants, a role known to be inherently subject to liminality, to generate high levels of stress, a lack of agency and a sense of being undervalued (Butt, 2016; Devecchi et al., 2012; Ravalier et al., 2021; Sirkko et al., 2022). Moreover, as reported in previous iterations of the broader study associated with these current findings (Wood et al., 2022; Wood & Happé, 2021), the sensory impacts of the school environment are often an exclusionary factor for autistic staff, and are evident in other work sectors too (Lorenz et al., 2016; Richards, 2012; Vincent, 2020).

While not all participants had left for negative reasons, most were certain they could not return, despite placing a high value on aspects of their employment in schools. The benefits they had brought to their work are revealed through motifs of kinship and belonging, egalitarianism and a positive conceptualisation of difference. These counter narratives of oppression and suggest that being autistic can provide a range of advantages, especially in relation to pupils at risk of marginalisation themselves, indicating the important role autistic school staff can play in reducing educational exclusion. This is mediated through a more egalitarian approach to teaching, an awareness of alternative methods of

pupil engagement and autism-specific strengths such as intense focus or monotropism (Murray et al., 2005). However, autistic aptitudes can be impeded by broader structural hierarchies, frustrating participants' attempts to support individuality in pupils and to demonstrate their own skills. These findings suggest a need to explore the perceived diminution of creativity known to impact on teachers (Perryman & Calvert, 2020) on autistic school staff specifically, who already experience several stressors by dint of being autistic in an environment rarely attuned to their needs (Petty et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2022). Moreover, although the process of staff departure reflects broader national trends of teacher attrition (Department for Education, 2022), there is a paucity of information on the disabled school workforce (Department for Education, 2023), a lacuna this study highlights.

While participants had maintained a degree of liminality in their work since leaving schools, this was nevertheless on their own terms. Motifs suggesting the need for openness and understanding, particularly via autistic-led insights, indicate that it is non-autistic others who need to challenge their own professional and attitudinal limitations (Wood & Milton, 2018). These findings indicate a need for enhanced understandings of broader intersectionalities in the teaching profession, such as the exclusion of autistic non-speaking teachers (Zimmerman, 2023), black trainee teachers' experiences of racism (Poku, 2022) and the barriers faced by disabled teachers in schools in different cultural contexts (Bogusz, 2019; Keane et al., 2018; Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Ware et al., 2021). Indeed, autism research more generally should take into greater account the fact that 'individuals who are both Black and autistic sit at the intersection of marginalized identities' (Malone et al., 2022, p. 4), and that autistic female and non-binary employees may have a particularly reduced sense of workplace belonging (Doyle et al., 2022). Furthermore, given that sensory, social and communication difficulties are known to impact on autistic pupils (Wood, 2021), providing a better work environment and addressing structural inequalities for school staff could facilitate more holistic inclusion practices in schools for both staff and children.

CONCLUSION

Although drawn from a small sample, the testimony provided by these former autistic school staff indicate the multiple barriers that can be faced by autistic teachers at all stages of the professional lifecycle. This can lead some autistic staff to withdraw from the profession, constituting a loss to schools and neurodiverse pupils of the particular aptitudes they can bring. Indeed, the insights derived from a close, linguistic analysis of autistic school staff discourses demonstrate the extent to which autistic

educators can support principles of diversity and inclusion in schools, and potentially play an important role in understanding and addressing the intersectional issues faced by pupils at risk of marginalisation and exclusion themselves.

While the lack of access to employment for autistic people and the ensuing significant personal and financial impacts (Solomon, 2020; Stone, 2019) must be addressed with some urgency, a clear focus on neurodiversity-informed approaches, incorporating the heterogeneity of the autistic population and the particularity of different professional sectors should be incorporated. This process should include the provision of equitable resources for disabled and neurodivergent teacher candidates, appropriate adaptations and understanding for autistic people from the point of recruitment (Davies et al., 2023), and clear strategies to address sensory, communication and social differences in schools.

A complicating factor and potential limitation of this study is that not all participants knew themselves that they were autistic while working in schools, and although research indicates that sharing a diagnosis at work does not always feel safe for autistic people in the school sector (Wood & Happé, 2021) and elsewhere (Romualdez et al., 2021), it may be that this information could have helped the participants in this study at the time. It is also not clear whether late diagnosis per se has a negative impact on individual outcomes (Leung et al., 2023). Furthermore, the growth of the neurodiversity movement, which posits, inter alia, strengths-based approaches to disability and difference (den Houting, 2019), is potentially sowing the seeds for better understanding of autistic and otherwise neurodivergent school staff across a range of work sectors.

There is also a specific need to understand better, and provide improved support for, autistic TAs, who may be especially vulnerable to disempowering practices in schools, despite their important role in relation to pupils with SEND. Above all, it is only by valuing autistic discourses and expertise, and supporting the visibility of the neurodiverse school workforce more than is currently the norm, that their much-needed strengths can be more fully deployed in the education sector, for the benefit of all.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.