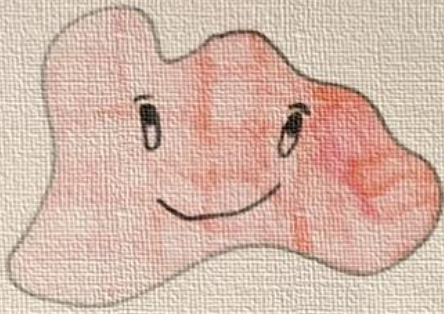
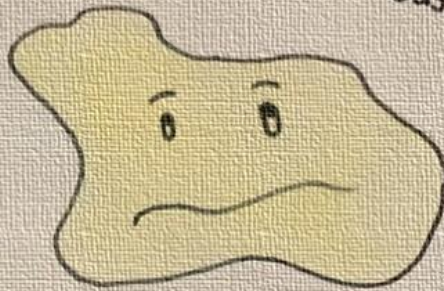


thrilled



worried



nervous

blissful

excited



happy



sad

Identifying the chosen spaces of a cross section of girls within a UK primary academy

anxious

joyful



downhearted



A MULTI-MODAL STUDY WITH GIRLS AGED 8 AND 9  
JULIE WIGGINS

## Research Report:

### **Identifying the chosen spaces of a cross section of girls within a UK primary academy: A multi-modal study with girls aged 8 and 9.**

Girls with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often face difficulties during their educational journey. It has been suggested that they often mask or camouflage their autistic traits to fit in with their surroundings and peers. This is a relatively new topic area in terms of previous research, however, the link between 'the camouflage effect' (Tierney *et al*, 2015) and diagnosis, displays a sex discrepancy between females and males on a ratio of 1:4. Previous research identified this discrepancy and the extent to which females can mask their autistic traits. (Ratto *et al*, 2007). There have been elicited parental and professional voices trying to understand sex specific symptoms (Grey *et al*, 2021), leaving gaps in which girls with ASD in mainstream education were not given a voice or perspective. Non-structured and non-participant observations and only 18 hours of observation suggests the need for an illumination of the girls' experiences (Moyses *et al*, 2015). Girls with ASD do not always receive correct support within mainstream schooling and struggle to navigate the curriculum as teaching and support staff are not properly equipped or trained in recognising their traits or the girls' ability to mask them. (Grey *et al*, 2021) Also uncovered was that practitioners tolerate or overlook subtle social challenges and internalising behaviours, finding boys with ASD easier to support because their traits are conspicuous, and intervention is easier (Dean *et al*, 2016).

Not receiving the correct support resulted in 'meltdowns' at home and parents expressed concern that their daughters could not cope with certain situations at school but were less likely to internalise their autistic traits at home (Sutherland *et al*, 2017). Furthermore, it has been noted in previous research that boys present differently and are therefore easier to support because their traits are more explicit. (Grey *et al*, 2021). The gaps in previous research, relate to the points of view of girls with autism and their experiences in mainstream education. This implies that further research is necessary in advocating their views, giving them a voice about their experiences, thus enabling the support staff to have a better understanding, and be able to bridge the gap in being able to properly support these girls in mainstream education. Existing literature consists of studies of girls and boys in different settings, providing statistical evidence and perspectives of adults about girls with autism. However, the studies did not provide enough evidence of experiences of girls with autism or their struggles attending mainstream education.

The main themes uncovered in previous research data consider social interaction of girls with autism and their peers, depicting innate difficulties in understanding social etiquette within friendship groups, anxiety and unspoken rules, especially in an educational setting. Firstly, the 'Camouflage effect' is mentioned throughout each article, providing an interesting hypothesis of the way girls cope with social situations

and their social worlds. Another theme of great importance throughout the research articles reviews the perspectives of teaching staff and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCO's) on identifying autism in girls, and the lack of experience or inability to identify the red flags of masking techniques displayed, showing the lack of training and therefore, the inability to positively support girls with autism. Additionally, previous research consists of many qualitative research methods, suggesting that a more quantitative approach is lacking in the research data. Lastly, the lack of participatory research *with* girls with autism identifies a lack in ethical consideration and a crucial viewpoint of the research subjects, leaving clear gaps for consideration and further research on this subject. Much of the research considers the viewpoints of the care givers and parents, as it is assumed, they 'know best' about their children, and therefore can speak on their behalf, even when the research is based on children's lives and well-being; adults are seen to be more knowledgeable, suggesting that children are less capable of articulating their views than adults. (Crivello and Murray, 2012).

### Theme One – Diagnosis and 'The Camouflage Effect'

The first theme, which appears as a consistent genre across all research articles, was the topic of female to male diagnosis in autism, the ratio of 1:4, in favour of males, shows a sex discrepancy in the prevalence of ASD. This bias of diagnosis can pose challenging experiences for girls on the autistic spectrum. Without the correct scoring in the 'gold standard' diagnostic measure, which is a standard testing technique, scoring children and young people on their social communication skills, cognition, communication, social awareness, motivation, daily living and socialisation, girls are likely to fall under the radar, not receive the correct diagnosis, and therefore not be able to access the support they require. It should be noted that although sex biases have been recognised within academic literature, associated policies and the recommended 'gold standard' assessment tools do not currently reflect this discrepancy. (Lai *et al.*, 2015). Previous research has defined the testing process as bias towards males presenting with ASD, because females tend to have a higher cognitive awareness and are able to 'mask' or 'camouflage' their autistic traits and social inabilities.

This bias in diagnostic data can entail a scary and challenging time for girls with autism. If the girls are not receiving the correct diagnosis because they are able to cover up their autistic traits, then the support that they receive in an educational setting will likely be non-existent, or not of the correct level for their individual needs.

For instance, a series of clinical based, semi-structured, diagnostic interviews undertaken in Maryland, USA, with the intention of identifying sex-based differences in autistic traits and adaptive skills, (Ratto *et al.* (2017), found that girls score consistently higher than their male counterparts in all aspects of cognition, social awareness, communication skills, social motivation and social awareness, whereas in another test, the girls consistently scored lower than the males in terms of socialisation, daily living and communication. This shows that girls can mask some



traits of ASD but not others. Similarly, Sutherland *et al.* (2017) uncovered a concerning outcome in a thematic study carried out in Australia in the form of a questionnaire. The research consisted of 350 participants and found 36 % of girls in mainstream education with a diagnosis of ASD had no support. Furthermore, the research found that 76% of females do not understand social cues, 63% do not understand friendship rules and 65% have difficulty within group settings. However, the study was based on parental responses and did not include the child's voice in any part of the study. These interpretive examples so far give an understanding of the difficulties that girls face in two small aspects of their lives. The findings suggest there is a lack of support in schools, in which girls with ASD go undetected and therefore do not and cannot access the support they need. Diagnosis is less likely, which leads to turbulent experiences both in the context of education and of home life. However, these two studies do not include the child's voice. There were no child participants, and the power dynamic was strongly with the parents and the clinicians.

Two examples of ethnographic research are presented in Gray *et al.* (2021) UK research, aiming to elicit parental voices and SENCO views to gain a better understanding of sex specific symptomology in females with ASD. This coincides with a study by Moyses & Porter's (2015), which provides an ethnographic case study upon the 'experiences of the hidden curriculum for autistic girls at mainstream primary school'. Each study carries out research in a primary school setting in the UK using mixed methods. Both consist of three female participants but using different methodology to collect their data. However, both studies arrive at the debate that girls with ASD use the camouflage technique to mask their difficulties in social situations, and interestingly, mimic and adapt their behaviour to conform to classroom rules, ensuing an unhealthy decline in their mental health. Looking back at (Sutherland *et al.*, 2017), parents have suggested that their female children with ASD often struggle in social situations, and will often have 'meltdowns' at home, because they have been 'masking' all day at school.

The Camouflage effect appears to be a common theme among the research articles. Tierney *et al.* (2015) found that girls with autism feel the need to conform at school to social norms and expectations of behaviour. However, there are covert rules that they do not understand and therefore, this leads ultimately, to rejection. Although Tierney's research was with adolescent girls, it highlights the need for action with primary aged girls presenting with ASD before they reach this crucial age of adolescence, as the camouflaging can be maintained until the transition to secondary school. This leads to a catalyst effect, making the girls vulnerable, overwhelmed and at risk of a noted decline in mental health.

Feeding into this research is Dean *et al.* (2016) with 'The art of camouflage' his qualitative, exploratory case study found that practitioners overlook or tolerate subtle social challenges and internalising behaviours, and ultimately, the camouflage effect is not protective for the child, but leaves the girls in a vulnerable situation, and ultimately unsupported at a crucial time in their learning.

## Theme Two – Lack of knowledge and training

Issues raised in four out of six findings either suggest that school staff were not knowledgeable enough in the presentation of ASD in females, and have gained their knowledge from work experience, or are not aware of the signs of a girl presenting with ASD. (Gray *et al.* 2021), (Moyses & Porter, 2015), (Dean *et al.* 2016) all found in their research that the awareness of girls presenting with ASD from support staff was slight and something that needed addressing in future research studies. As mentioned in (Gray *et al.* 2021), SENCO and support staff admitted in questionnaire responses that they were more knowledgeable in noticing behaviours of ASD presenting in males rather than females and would support girls with ASD in the same way they would a male. Furthermore, staff noted that they did not have sufficient training in this field or only had experiences of autism from their workplace experiences. This suggests that further training for all staff is necessary in being able to notice the signs of a girl presenting with autism, not only for good practise, but to be able to properly support the child in an educational setting. Although these research studies were carried out with a more participatory approach, the need for child voice and having active participants in these studies would have enriched the data with their own experiences, which in turn may have helped the support staff and SENCO's to better support them, if they could listen to their point of view. If control during the research was given to the children and young people, the issues of staff not knowing what to look for, may have been overcome.

## Theme three – Different methods of research

The research methods used in this topic were mostly qualitative, with some quantitative methods. This has given interesting data about the way in which young girls mask their autistic traits, it is important to look at different ways of research to ensure an ethically correct, diverse and appropriate set of data. A further form of longitudinal study to follow girls from the start of primary school, throughout their educational career to gain a better understanding of their whole lives, giving the opportunity for child-led research and handing power dynamic to the children. This would reduce power inequalities and ensure that the data is inclusive, informs policy and is not tokenistic.

Moyses & Porter (2015), Gray *et al.* (2021), Tierney *et al.* (2015) and Ratto *et al.* (2017) used semi-structured interviews/ semi-structured diagnostic interviews providing a more flexible approach. As Flewitt (2006) suggests; it provides a backbone for the interview but allows more flexibility for feedback, which shifts the power dynamic back to the participant and away from the researcher. This allows the participant to have more of a 'voice' and values their expertise on their own lives.

Moreover, Moyse & Porter (2015) also used non-structured, non – participant observation in their research, which raises the ethical and practical question of whether the child was competent with the language used and how much they understood? It should be noted that in the research study, a gatekeeper, in the form of a class teacher was involved in selecting the three participants for the research study. This shifts the power dynamic directly into the adult sector, as the researcher and children have no say on who is involved. Agency and participation are key elements, ensuring the child's voice is listened to.

Alternatively, Sutherland *et al.* (2017) used mixed methods of research; qualitative and quantitative methods in the form of a questionnaire, which also provided space for written answers as well as set questions. Also, within the research, they congressed at a group interview, therefore, enriching their data with an interview style technique. This style of research allows the participant to have a voice, although it was not that of a child, it enables the researcher to gain a different perspective within the same research study. The process of interview, as Flewitt (2006) comments, can be 'infused with complex relations of power'. It is very important that the researcher ensures that the power dynamic is as equal as possible when conducting an interview, and the dissemination process needs to be ethical in terms of what is included or not included.

Dean *et al.* (2016) and Tierney *et al.* (2015) used a mixed method approach, consisting of qualitative methods such as an exploratory case study design, (Dean *et al.*) and sociograms (Tierney *et al.*) in a participatory activity with the young people. Observational field notes were collected. This illustrates a more participatory approach, but suggests that further research is required, as this research was carried out in only one observation. Key points could have been missed or not recorded, including children who may have been absent from school, changes in anxiety levels within the children, support or no support in place, inability to observe how the children would have reacted if there was, for example, a change in the weather, dynamic of the routine, or change of teaching staff. Although the findings of the research provided useful data, it was not carried out over a substantial length of time, leaving gaps for behaviour changes and allowing the children to show the researcher their 'real selves' or their 'whole selves'. However, if a more in-depth study were to be carried out, the research data may be different. The sociograms used were cultural constructions (Hearn & Thompson), which can be seen as representations (Hall, 1997) of a child's life or world. It may have been helpful if these were photographed or included in the research data as a visual representation, to show the reader how the child created their artefact. However, it was only included as a write up, and no visual representation of the sociograms were included. Furthermore, it is important that artefacts are treated with the same ethical considerations that an interview, or any other research method would be, as the child or young person may have no control over what happens once their artefact has been included in a research dissemination and published.

This ties in with the structure of the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001, 2005) in respect that children are 'experts on their own lives' (Langsted, 1994). The Mosaic

approach encompasses a range of participatory visual methods, which would be an ideal way of learning how young people with autism view their world and how they experience education. It is well known that young people with autism find visual aids a better form of navigation for their worlds. (Clark, 2014). It can enable them to access and conceptualise things such as their timetables and routines. By using the mosaic approach, young people can identify their emotions. Furthermore, it can give the researcher or concerning adults a better understanding of their interests and concerns, which is vital in this type of research. As Clark and Moss suggest, the Mosaic approach engages with the perspectives of research participants and can enrich the findings of empirical research.

It would be beneficial if all research involving children could be in the form of qualitative participant observation, which, as Montgomery (2009) suggests, allows researchers to get close to children they are studying and learn about their worlds, their feelings and understandings. This would be paramount in finding out about girls' experiences of autism in primary schools.

Most of the research articles expressed their accrument of written consent, and many were passed on an ethical level by supporting bodies, such as the NHS Research Ethics Committee (Tierney *et al.*) and local universities. Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) Research Approvals Committee (Sutherland *et al.*), Institutional Review Board's Approval at the University of California (Dean *et al.*), The British Psychological Society (2018) Code of Ethics and Conduct (Gray *et al.*), Ethics Committee at the University of Bath (Moyses & Porter), and finally, all procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration standards. It is also noted in this study that there was no conflict of interest. (Ratto *et al.*).

The research initiative of all studies was beneficial regarding new findings and new statistics. However, there is a consistent lack of participatory research *with* the child/children. Parental views and clinical professional views are important, and the findings of these research data provide a strong level of support to the hypothesis of 'the camouflage effect'. However, not including the child's voice can be in a way 'silencing their voice' (Bucknall, 2009). All research had limitations and the need for further, more in-depth study, to ensure an inclusive response regarding children's voice. The studies were interesting and provided an insight to the biases of the diagnosis process, in which girls with autism are left behind. It also highlighted the need for support for young girls with autism who may not have a diagnosis. Finally, it illuminates the need for support and teaching staff to achieve a better understanding of how girls present with autism, and ways in which they can be supported for a rich and inclusive learning experience within a primary school setting.

The initial proposal for research was going to be mostly qualitative, including one-to-one interviews between the researcher and participants, observations and participant led research. This would engage the girls to take control of the research, using

photographs to get a true representation of the child's world (Hall, 1997). The use of visual aids or appropriate adaptations will ensure all children can participate. This may be necessary, depending on the severity of ASD and whether the child participant is verbal or nonverbal.

The driver for this project was that I had seen girls that demonstrated autistic traits in my workplace that slipped 'under the radar'.

I wanted to identify children that were masking traits of autism in a mainstream primary school.

Following a meeting with the SENCo, headteacher and my mentor, the school weren't happy for me to make any identification of girls displaying traits of ASD, as this would be unethical, therefore, I decided to look at the differences in spaces in which girls were happy/sad/anxious etc.

I believed that this may identify some anomalies in girls different from those in neuro-typical girls.

Although disappointing, this in itself could highlight some anomalies as to what is considered neuro-typical.

'By using an interpretivist approach, it allows the researcher to implement the research methodology within its natural setting, allowing for personal contact with the group being studied in order to attain an 'insider view' (Tuli, 2010).

'Allowing the children to use participatory visual methods to gain a deeper understanding of their perspectives.' (Clark, & Moss, (2001).

Due to the ethical consideration of the research target group, it was decided that it would be more ethically correct to randomly select a group of girls in the mainstream school, rather than try to engage with girls that I, the researcher, thought to be showing traits of ASD.

Although the research target group had been changed, the findings were very interesting, and going forward, hopefully this research can be a foundation for further research in this field.

It was decided that a manageable group to work with would be approximately 15 children. This was following feedback from school and input from SENCo and head teacher.

I deliberately did not mention autism in consent form, as I was not going to identify girls with autism.

BERA guidelines were adhered to throughout the research project.

15 girls were chosen at random after permission was granted by parents and the gatekeeper. The head teacher selected 15 folded names from a bowl, and the research began...



'Researchers should think about whether they should approach gatekeepers before directly approaching participants, and about whether they should adopt an institution's own ethical approval and safeguarding procedures; this is usually a requirement.' (*BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, 2018).

The data collection methods I used in this study were:

- Auditory interviews recorded on a Dictaphone
- Visual photographs captured by the girls
- Story boards created by the girls, including their chosen photographs.
- Written captions and emotions depicted by the girls.

Method of Analysis:

- Thematic Analysis – identified repeated patterns and themes reported.
- Revelation of anomalies from a small number of girls and their identification with spaces
- Feelings of: Anxiety, sadness, worried, nervous.
- Majority shared happy emotions when describing their school spaces.
- 

Respect for personal integrity and autonomy, justice and avoiding harm must be adhered to, therefore ensuring the child is protected throughout the research process.

During the research study, I adhered to the BERA guidelines and these informed the research from conception to dissemination.

The research carried out must be 'good' research to ensure principles are followed, as it is the right and correct thing to do.

Respecting children throughout the research is highly important and ensuring the children are seen as sensitive, dignified human beings is necessary.

My Research Study:

An interpretivist approach created an opportunity to carry out a participatory study in an educational setting to gather data, contributing to informing changes to established provision (Clark, 2010), improving policy and practise for young girls in a mainstream primary school.

During the research project, I used the initials of the girls, so that they cannot be easily identified, and the school is not named. The school in which the research was carried out, is a mainstream primary academy in the region of Essex in the United Kingdom.

Research Data Collection:

## Data Collection

Date : 21<sup>st</sup> March 2022

Group Size: 13/15 girls. (1 girl off sick, 1 girl on holiday).

Children present: MD, LN, AC, EM, EI, RS, CF, ST, CM, TE, KH, JH,

I found an empty classroom and asked the girls to sit down at the table, I explained the research proposal to them and they all seemed interested. I explained that they do not have to take part, and if they felt that they did not want to anymore, then they could withdraw. All the children understood this and agreed they would let me know if they did not want to continue. I began to explain why I was doing the research, the importance of getting their perceptions of the spaces within the school and decided to do a group session to start. I placed the photos of the various spaces onto the table and asked the girls to stand around the table and have a look. I gave them a few minutes and asked them if they recognised all of the spaces. I was surprised to find that two of the spaces seven of the girls did not recognise. I showed them where these spaces were and they wanted to go and have a look. TE did not recognise the room off of the hall, which has a photocopier in it and is used for intervention groups sometimes.

MD "I went in there once, because I was feeling very sad..."

AC did not recognise her cloakroom, which is twinned with the cloakroom for the classroom next door. She probably does not see it from the angle, which the photograph was taken and looked quite confused. MD then started to name the coats of the children from the photograph of the cloakroom. Some of the girls joined in with "that's my coat".

Some of the girls started talking about the spaces and explaining how these spaces made them feel. It was an interesting conversation with lots of positive points, and some interesting mixed feelings about certain places.

EI "I hate that one, I hate that one, it makes me feel creeped out!!" EI was referring to the picture of the main school gate.

Once the girls had returned from the reading area just outside the classroom we were in, I asked the girls if anyone would like to talk about some of the spaces and the way they made them feel.

MD "Yes!" MD then picked up the photograph of the school hall and said "this one makes me feel a bit excited, we go in there for P.E. and have assemblies". MD carried on explaining how some of the spaces made her feel, she chose the photograph of the school field, she said "I feel a tiny bit nervous around here (pointing to the top of the field) ... because around there, there is a bee hive and it makes me feel a bit worried because I have been stung a couple of times". She then chose the picture of the tyre and gym trail area and said "this place makes me feel a bit happy, I usually spend my time playing and normally go around there playing games". Finally, she chose a photograph of the room off of the hall and said "this

room kind of makes me feel a tiny bit happy because its somewhere I can go and say what I need to say”.

EI “This one, this one makes me feel a little bit anxious, every time we come in or come out there’s lots of people crowding. There’s lots of people and year sixes standing in front of the gates. EI then chose the picture of the Head teacher’s office and said, “This one makes me feel a little bit shy because sometimes when I get called there or have to go there I feel shy because there are always people in there like the head teacher and sometimes the SENDCO”.

TE “ I do, kind of, like this one (photograph of the SEN room which is also used by the PTA to hold sales at certain times of the year) ... because sometimes we can go in there to like buy stuff”.

I had to ask the girls to be quiet because I was struggling to hear TE as she is very quiet.

TE “I like the hall because, erm, we get to do stuff and we have the after school club in here that I really enjoy, and we do P.E. in here which I enjoy and we have assemblies”.

LN “I liked the tyres because I sometimes play on them to make me feel more happy”.

RS “I feel safe in my class because I can trust my class and stuff... I also feel safe in like the Orchard and places and it just makes me feel calm. We have girl drama like you know and we can talk about our stuff in there”.

The classroom we were working in started to get filled up with the class returning from P.E. so we moved into the hall to talk about things further.

RS “I feel safe in my class and the hall sometimes, I also feel safe in the head teacher’s office because I trust her. I feel safe in here, the printing room, I feel safe in Acorn class, I dunno... because all of the younger kids, I like them and I trust them. I feel safe in my cloakroom” I said “you feel safe in your cloakroom? It’s a very messy cloakroom!” RS “No! That’s the other class’s cloakroom, ours is the tidy side!”.

CM “The medical room isn’t always a good place, because people are normally hurt when they’re going in there, and crying”.

Other children started to talk about the medical room “it might make you a bit sad”... “it stinks as well”.

JW “it stinks? What does it stink of?”

CM “bacterial wipes”. “It smells like the doctors”.

JW “Oh I see, so it smells quite clinical does it?”

Girls “yeah”. MD “it’s also very clean in there”.

The girls were given emotion cards from the 'Zones of Regulation' which they are all familiar with and use in the classroom to express how they are feeling. I asked the girls to explain to me what they were doing.

RS "We're putting these cards on the places".

I then took a photograph of the girls putting the emotions onto the photographs.

I asked the girls if there were any spaces that they felt I had missed out.

MD "I feel very calm and happy, in the space between Maple and Willow class".

EI "I feel a bit frustrated in Elm". JW "Why do you feel frustrated in Elm?" EI "I didn't put that!?".

This was the end of the first session.

Session 2 will involve asking each girl ten questions on a one to one basis.

#### Session 2 data collection:

LN "After School Club I kind of feel nice" "Sometimes I feel anxious or worried in the head teacher's office".

"I feel a bit weird about reception class because I have never been in there" LN did not start the school in reception.

When asked about how the spaces make her feel LN said "sometimes at the gate makes me feel abit happy or sad. I don't get much time with my Mum or little brother, I will miss my little brother and I just have to give him a hug".

When asked about the emotions in the zones of regulation LN chose calm for the After School Club and content for the outside photographs.

When asked if there was anything else she would like to say about the spaces she said "they're alright".

LN said she would change the room off of the hall, she wanted to change the cupboards because she didn't like them.

When asked to look at the photos and think about the word friendship she said "I feel comfortable at the tyres. Me, Jess and Coral, Poppy and Madeline play on there" ... "In my class".

CF when asked what she thinks about the photos "This one makes me feel quite happy (reading area) sometimes I like to sit in my cloakroom and just chill".

CF chose relaxed for the reading area, ready to learn for the cloakroom, she chose appreciated for the field because she likes the field. She likes outside because she likes to relax on the bench. CF feels uncomfortable and shy for the headteacher's office.

"I feel happy in the After School Club."

When asked if she would change any spaces she said no.

When asked what spaces she would identify with the word friendship, she chose the reading area to 'hang out with her friends'.

PH said, "The after school club because my mum won't let me go". PH recognised all of the spaces within the school.

PH when asked about feelings associated with the photos she said "No" "They all make me happy".

Z-O-R "Acorn class makes me feel happy because I like playing with the little children". "The tyres make me feel happy because I always play there with MD".

When asked if she wanted to change any of the spaces she said "No".

When asked which photos she would associate with the word friendship she said "I don't know why but After School Club and the playground. After School Club you get to stay more with your friends and the playground you get to play with your friends at school."

JH when asked what she thought about the pictures, her body language was very closed. JH said she recognised all of the spaces. JH said that none of the spaces made her feel a certain way. I showed her the Z-O-R emotions. JH chose happy for the After School Club. Excited for the Climbing frame because it was out of action for a long time, and now the children can go back on there. When asked what spaces she would change, JH said she wouldn't change anything and when asked what pictures she would identify with the word friendship, she chose the After School Club and her classroom, she said because her friends are there.

TE said "well I like the top playground because erm like me and my friends always do the gym trail and sometimes play in the bushes." "Well, I like After School Club because it's always very fun" "When I go to the staff room sometimes, erm, sometimes it's a little bit hot in there." "And then I like the tyres and the equipment as well, erm well, the equipment is fun to play with, and you can just jump to one another and it's just fun".

TE recognised all of the spaces. TE chose some emotions from the Z-O-R to identify how she felt. TE said, "I really like my classroom, I like that we do art and we have a reading corner. When I walk in I feel safe because I know I'll be safe in there". "I like erm, where we go in and out of the school gates and I also like the Orchard because there is mother's day sales, father's day sales and Christmas sales."

When asked if she would change any of the spaces she said "I would probably change maybe this one (front of the school) it kind of has like loads of bushes and once I got spiked by something in there".

When asked what pictures she identifies with friendship, she said she would chose the top playground because me and my friends always go up and play here, and also the equipment because we can play on the tyres". "I would chose maybe the hall, because it has assemblies in and also have woodland club in there".

EI said "Erm, I feel very calm when I look at these picutes, some of them make me feel a little bit like anxious, like corridors, like that one, that one, and that one (the



meadow, head teacher's office and the school gate)... I don't like it when the lights are off...I don't like it when it's really crowded".

EI recognised all of the spaces EI said, "Reception class is a little bit like happy to me because there's lots of toys and lots of children that try and make friends with me, its lots of colourful". "Probably the reading corner over there because it's quiet and you can read books if you want and it's quieter than the classroom". "I'm going to put annoyed upset, nervous, worried and anxious on that one (gate). I feel a little bit annoyed when I'm in the hall, because when there's like assemblies and everyone's talking I feel like I'm the only one who sits there listening, and people are in my ear like E E E and I'm like NO, I'm being quiet".

When asked if she'd change any of the spaces she said "yes, I think I would change this part (top playground), I would change it because some of the old stuff has been there for lots of years and I feel like I'd just change it up, and put in a ladder with a base under it and like a little playground, it would make me feel a little bit happy and I would appreciate it".

When asked which pictures she would identify with friendship, she said "the front of the school, because erm, we can like sometimes get my friends there and have a chat around the bushes, after school".

AC "yeah this one makes me feel happy because I get to play with my friends (top playground)... the tyres make me feel excited because like it's really fun playing on them and like I really like playing on them, and some of the new gym equipment, not all of it because some is boring. I feel happy in the classroom".

When asked if she would change any of the spaces, AC said, "maybe this one (reading area), maybe like, the reading area can maybe like... I think like these boxes should go there and they should go there (boxes) ...".

"I'd change the CEPTION.... I'd put the R and E back up, because they fell off".

When asked what spaces she associated with friendships, AC said "this one (climbing frame, tyres, gym equipment, playground and gym trail, field, classroom, cloakroom" "the playground I like playing there and every time I go out to break I do flips and stuff with my friends".

"My class it's like break time and like wet play I like playing there".

MD "erm, some of them are quite calming, some are a bit stressful, like in my classroom its quite noisy sometimes.... Yeah some of them make me a bit happy, some a bit stressful, and some a bit sad".

"Well, I feel kind of good when I am in reception class because I remember how good I felt when I read to the small children and it made me feel good and I made some friends in there". "You'll normally see the first aid room when you feel upset. Sometimes the classroom makes me a tiny bit annoyed, I sit with some children that I don't like and they're noisy and I just sit there with my fingers over my ears, about 25% noisy when I'm doing maths and people are chatting if they finish quickly, that's

what makes me annoyed. The outside makes me feel happy, away from where the wasps stay, I normally sit around talking to my friends.”

“I feel nervous in next door’s class because it’s the older kids class. Then, in the head teacher’s office, it makes me a tiny bit nervous because it’s the head teachers office and once me and L got chosen to go in and I got a bit worried, but us girls could go because we didn’t do anything. I feel nervous in the SEN room, I don’t know why, I have groups in there. Top playground nervous because of the beehive, I avoid the area near the beehive. I’m fine at the top playground but a bit worried just at the corner over here’.

Change – “Yes I’d get rid of the bee hive, the sandpit. The reason I got stung and boys were messing about with the stick and the wasps starting chasing me and I got stung so it makes me worried”. I get excited about going to new spaces”. “If I could change something I actually don’t really know what I’d like to change....oh there is one thing, the cloakroom gets a bit messy because the pegs are too close to each other, I’d like lockers, so there is more space”.

When asked about which spaces she identifies with friendships, she said “ *MD names her friends*” “actually at the bottom playground and the top because I made a very good friend because she wasn’t joining in, and I asked if she was ok and we were friends”.

RS recognised all of the spaces. “Most of them safe. Most I feel safe in”.

RS said she would not change any of the spaces.

RS said “none because I have drama, I don’t have friends.” “Probably be on the field”.

ST “tyres, make me feel sad because I have no one to play with” All the outside areas she said she felt sad.

Classroom “I feel happy, because if I’m sad I can talk to my teachers”. ST recognised all of the spaces.

ST said she would change the cloakroom because it is too messy and “I cannot get in there. Erm, put like boxes that pack lunches and stuff go in, and more room for the coats and stuff to go on”.

Friendships, ST identified outside as a space she would play with her friends.

EM “Erm, can I pick out any picture? I don’t know...”

EM recognised all of the spaces, except the room off the hall.

EM said “erm, its like a space outside the playground, like near to C class, the playground bit, it makes me feel anxious, because erm I used to get bullied there. ‘Coz teachers can’t see there, because the teachers are normally in the middle, like, around like there (pointing to top playground). I used to but I don’t really anymore, because of that.”

"I like my cloakroom, so when I return from lunch, because I don't normally eat my lunch and I get hungry, I ask Mr L if I can get a drink but I go and eat my lunch. I don't feel like eating at lunch sometimes."

"I don't like that place". (reception) "Once my grandad was like 2 hours late to pick me up and I just had to sit there and the teachers were looking at me, doing a weird face at me and I was like "WHAT?"

When asked if she would change anything, she said, "I think we should have a time out room. With L.E.D. lights and that... like so like with people with anxiety and that... If I like get overwhelmed or something, I can go in there and calm myself before I go back to class.... Maybe instead of a bright light, we could have L.E.D. lights and cover them with cotton, and it looks like clouds...I have that in my room, I just go in my room if I've had an argument I can go in there and just chill. In the cloakroom, normally other kids go in and ask what I'm doing."

EM said she would not change anything "I like this school".

Friendships - Cloakroom, "when it's too cold outside" Bench "I like this place (gym trail). Head teacher's office "I like talking to the head teacher, I would prefer it if I could talk to someone I could talk to who wouldn't tell my parents stuff". "I'd prefer if I could talk to someone that I could tell them stuff without them telling anyone without asking me".

GG "I don't like reception class, I don't like the colour". GG did not recognise all of the spaces. She identified some spaces she just did not like – "I don't like the chairs" in the SEN room.

GG would change "maybe like erm different colours". GG does not like the school colours. When asked what colour she would change things to she said, "purple" she told me her old school uniform used to be purple.

When asked about friendship, she chose tyres and climbing frame.

CM – She chose the reception area with 'Boris the Lockdown Leveret' because it reminds her of lockdown.

CM did not recognise all of the spaces. CM did not recognise the SEN room.

When asked what spaces made her feel a certain way, she was unable to identify any emotions linked with the pictures. CM also said she would not change anything with the spaces.

When asked what spaces she would identify with the word friendship, she chose her classroom and cloakroom because "during lunchtime and playtime, if you need a drink you go in the cloakroom". "Outside of school (gate) you walk in and out of school altogether".

KH – "erm this one reminds me of when we had the fish" Boris the Lockdown Leveret replaced the fish tank at the end of 2021. KH recognised all of the spaces in the photographs.

“Erm, the cloakroom makes me feel like I’m safe in there because it’s like when I’ve got a headache or something I can just sit out there, and sometimes in golden time I’m allowed to go out there and play with fidgets or something to just calm”. The playground, field, gym equipment makes me feel active; it makes me want to play with my friends a bit more, and do cartwheels on the field”.

KH would change the classrooms “maybe so like a relaxing area or somewhere you can have a sleep”. “Coz you have to get up really early and sometimes people might just want a lay in”.

When asked about friendships, KH identified the playground, “maybe the front of school, because that’s where you get to play with your friends, and at the gates you get to like meet new people if it’s like the first day of school” “With your friends you can meet up at the start of the day”. Classroom – “you get to sit with your friends, and get your education with your friends”.

Friday 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022

At lunchtime, I observed the girls whilst eating their lunch. I sat in the hall today and observed the unstructured lunchtime environment.

12:30 – 12:50pm

GG + EM sitting together. RS on her own. LN, PH + MD sitting together, all eating, no conversation. AC sitting with friend. EM spat out some food “it tastes mouldy!”.

JH sitting with CF and some boys. AC eating and silently observing some noisy boys at her table. AC got up with her lunch and moved onto another table, with ST, EM + GG.

TE sitting with AC. TE smiling, conversing with boys at the table.

MD completely focused on her lunch, but seemingly listening to LN + PH conversation. All girls smiling, except MD + AC.

AC continuously looking around at other people – no expression until she caught eye contact with me, then beamed a smile.

The final part of the research study was to ask the girls to take their own photos of spaces around the school and visually describe how those spaces made them feel.

Below are some of the photographs taken by the girls. Some of the images have been censored or edited slightly to protect the identity of the school and adhere to

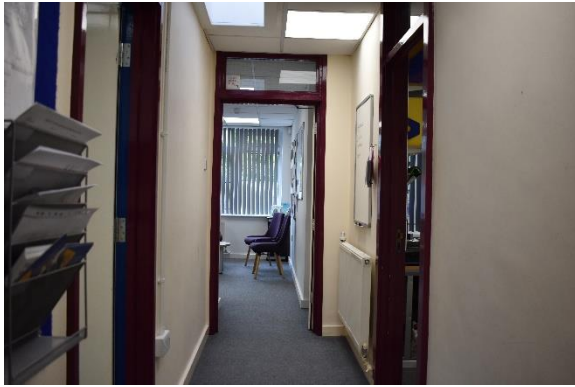


ethical guidelines.



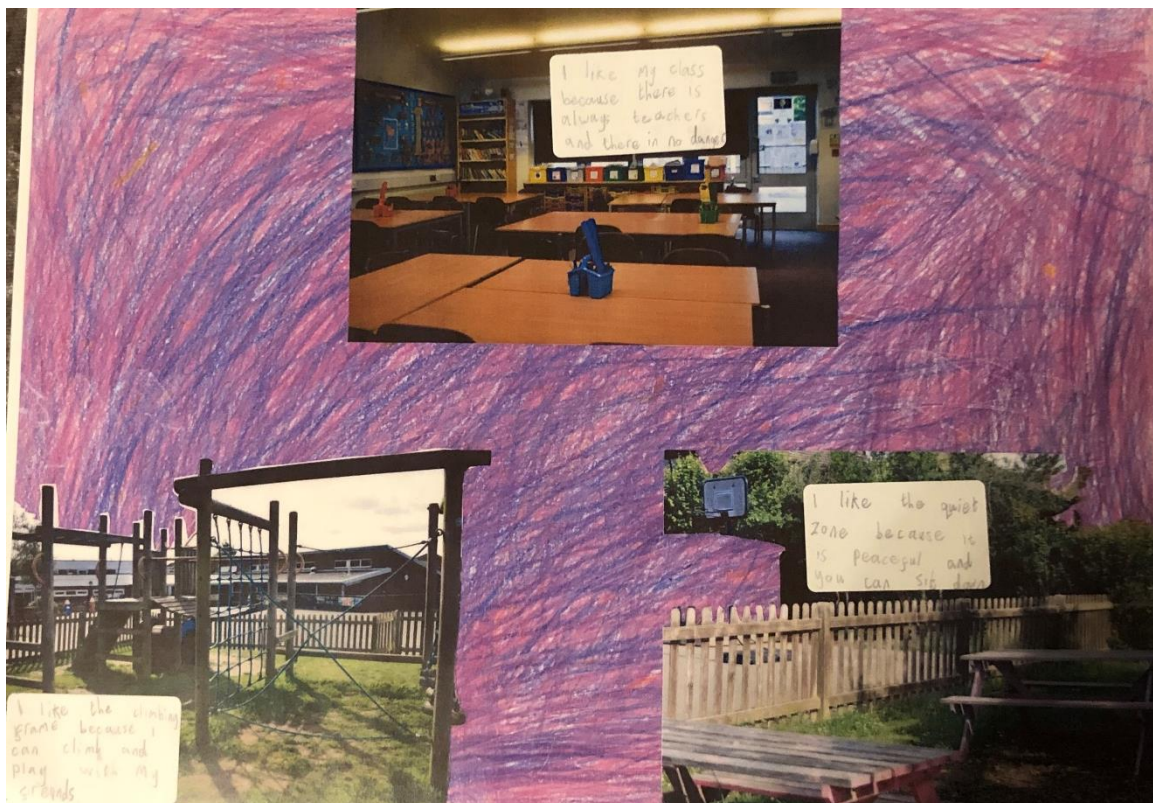




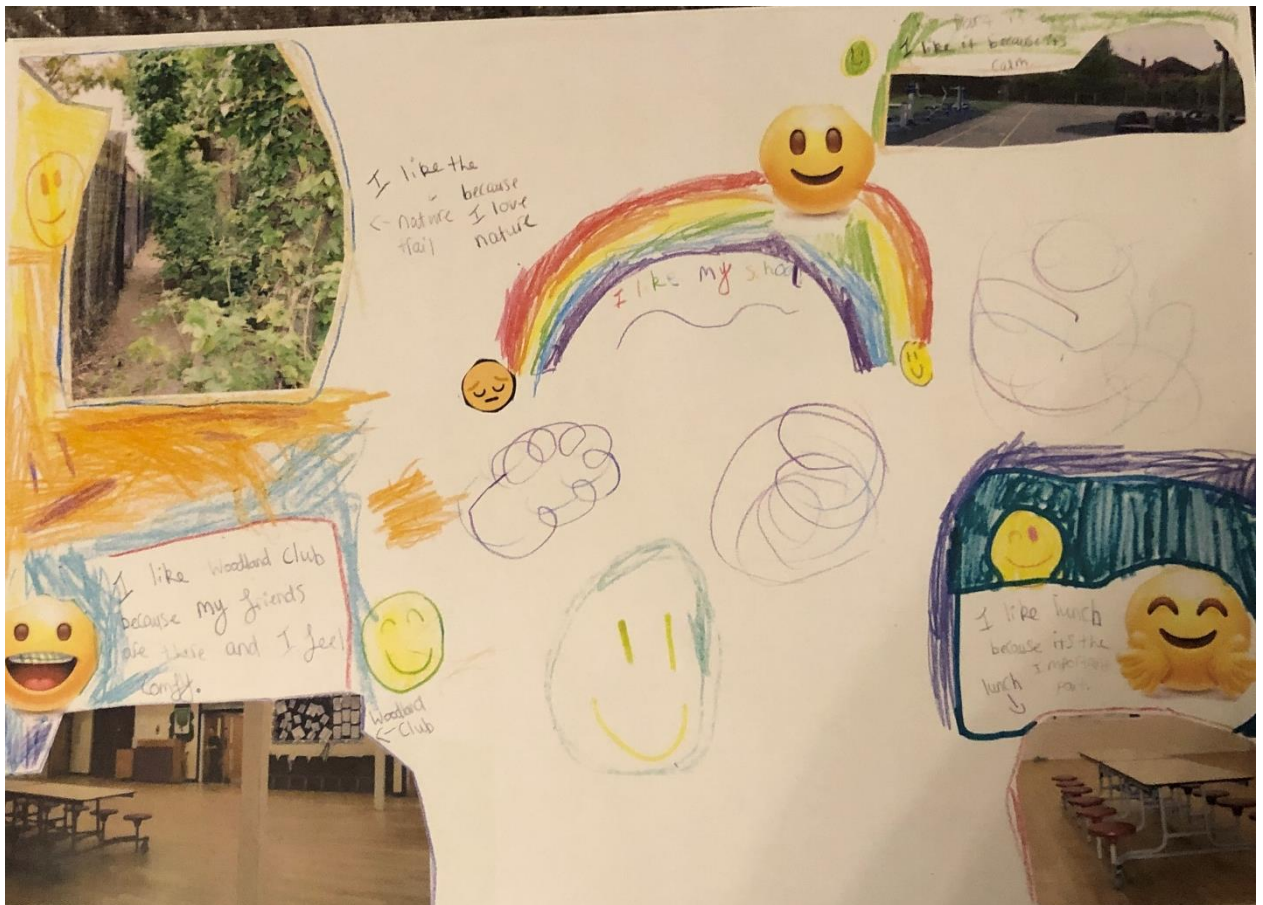


The girls were then presented with their printed photographs and asked to create a story board, to share how they feel about certain spaces within the school.

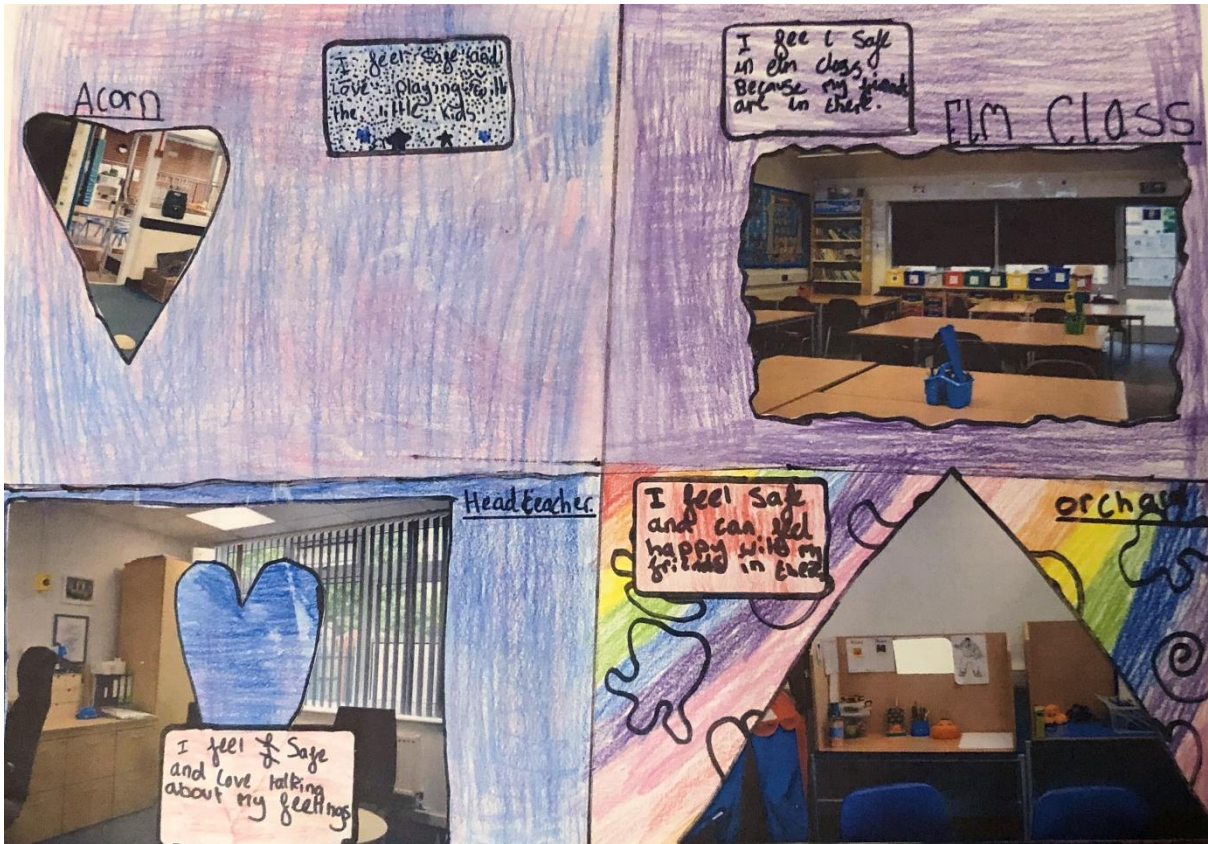
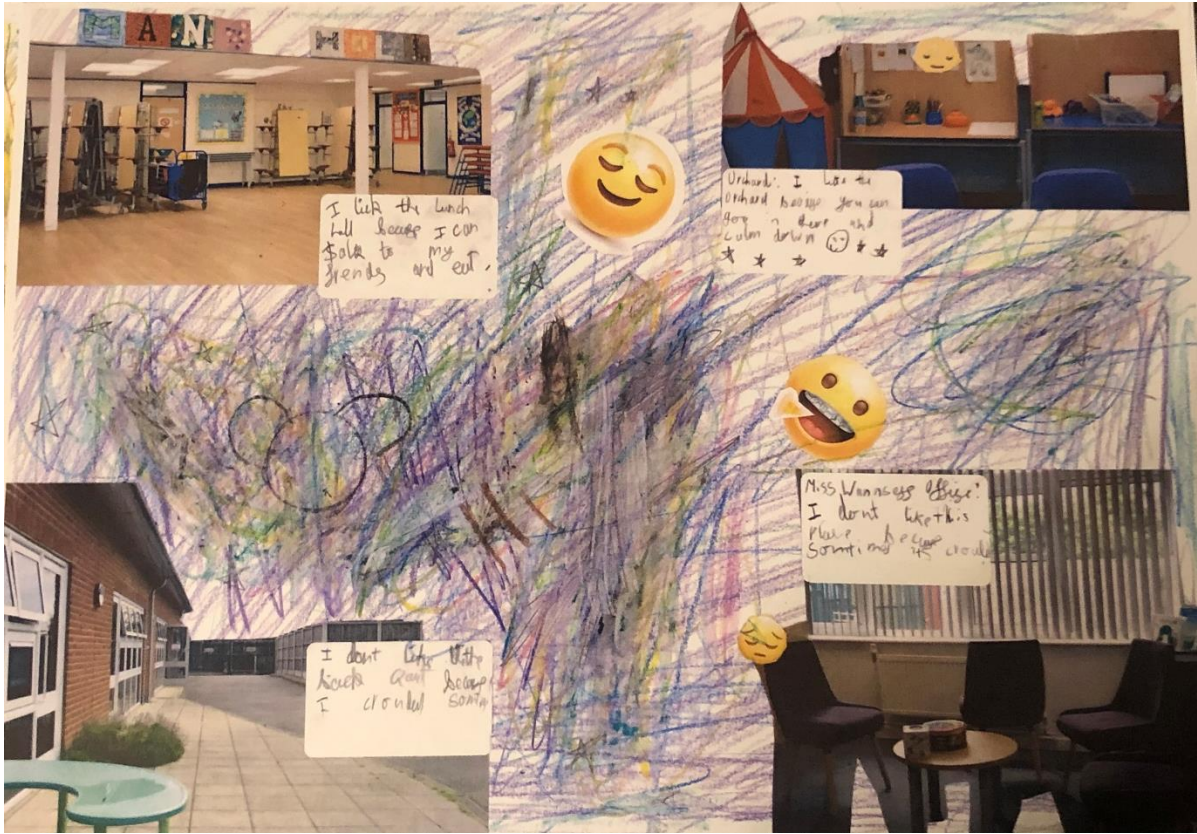
Below are the story boards that the girls created:



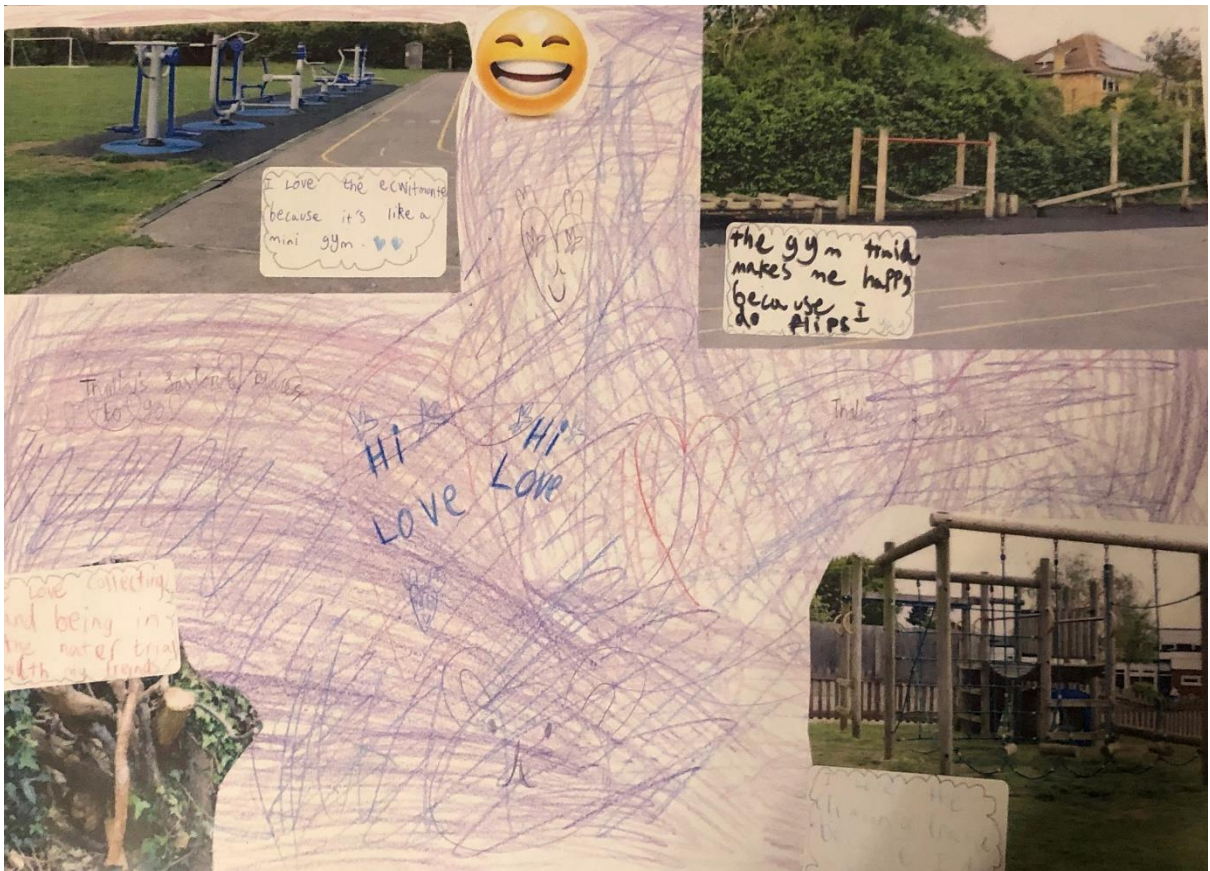




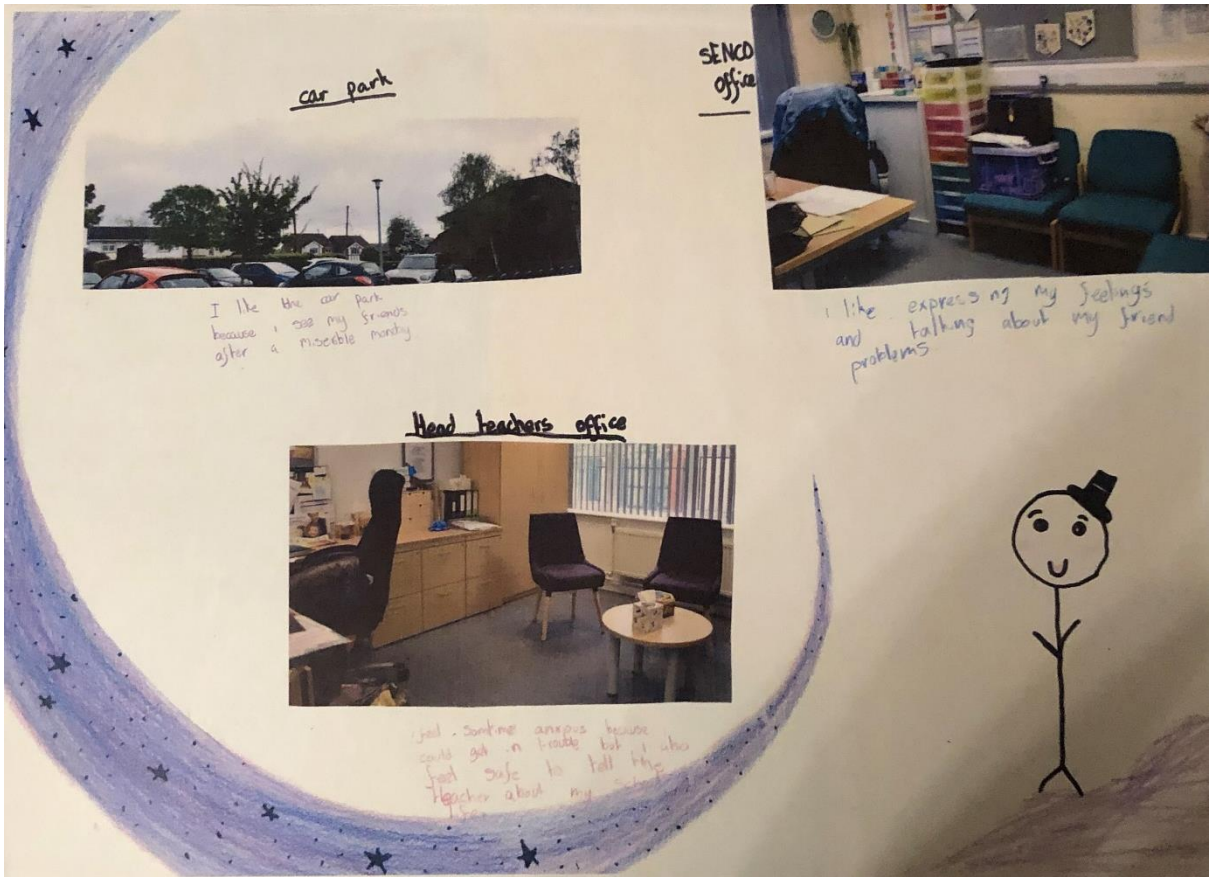
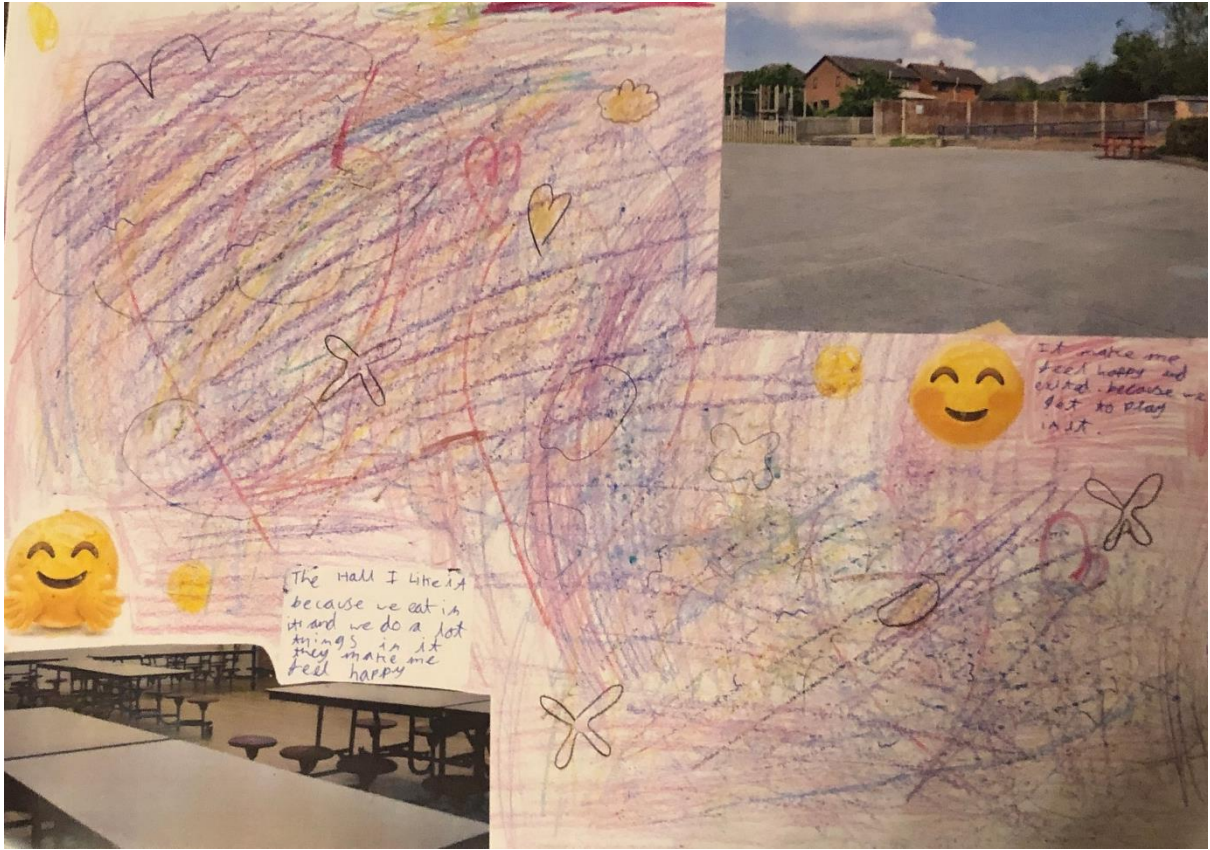




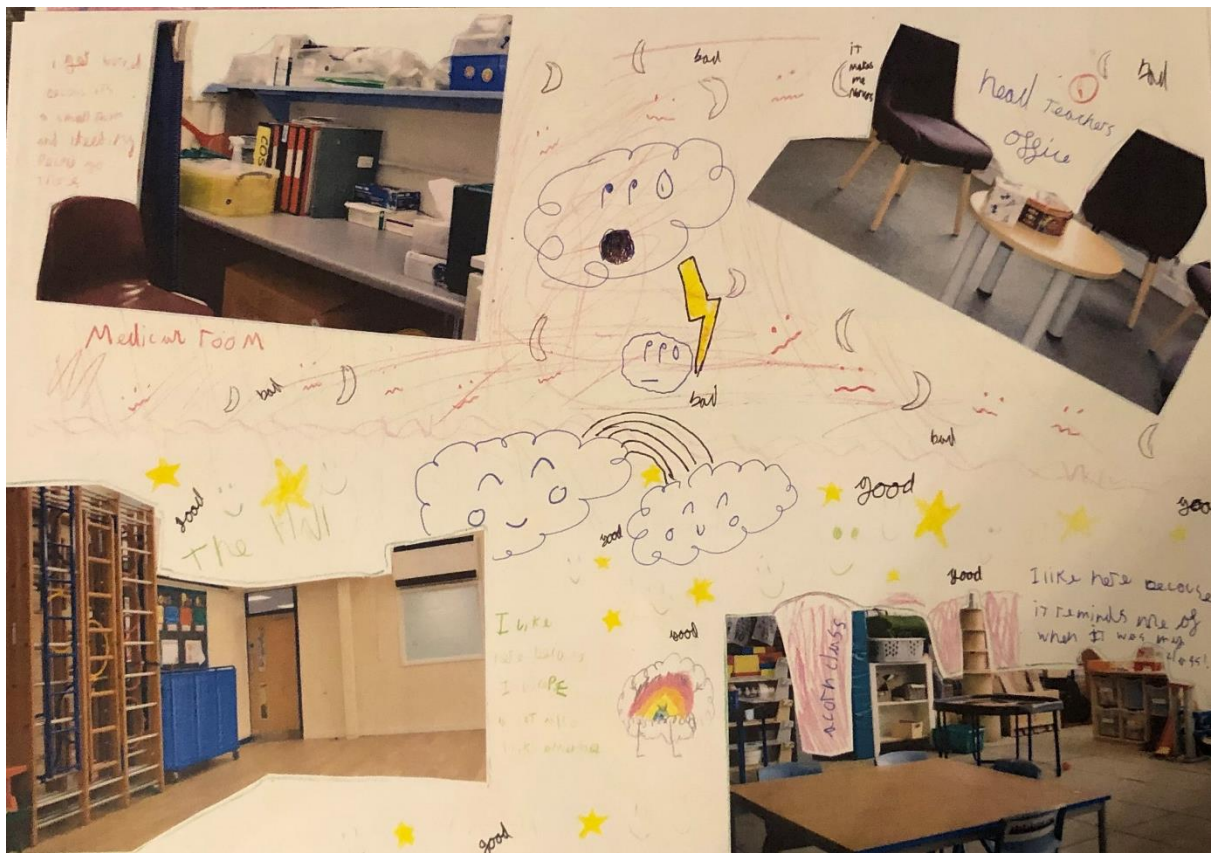














#### Data Analysis:

Although I found that the majority of children enjoyed their spaces and spoke very positively, there were some anomalies in my findings:

- ❖ "I like the car park because I see my friends after a miserable Monday".
- ❖ "I like the bathroom because I know I can lock myself in there if I need some space". "I like lunch because it's the important part". - These findings were different to the other children.
- ❖ A couple of the children shared a dislike for the medical room
- ❖ There was a mixed bag of responses for the Head Teacher's office, but it was divided between 'safe' and 'nervous and worried'.

The strengths I found during this research study was how engaged the girls were and how much they wanted to take part. It was a very positive thing to be a part of, and all of the girls seemed to enjoy taking part and asking lots of questions about the research.

Unfortunately, one of the limitations was finding a window of time that was enough. Although the teachers were very accommodating, I found that sometimes the period was just a little short. Another limitation that was not expected was the absence of one of the girls; during the time of the research project (and not because of it), she became



a school refuser, which limited the responses to 14 children instead of 15. However, the girl has now recently returned to school under a reduced timetable and is progressing well with support.

Most of the girls expressed a positive view of their school spaces and voiced how they feel safe in school. However, it was interesting to see how the terms 'anxious', 'nervous' and 'worried' came up quite often. If there were more time to continue with this research study, it would be interesting to speak to those girls who felt these emotions, and explore those circumstances in more depth. This would give the girls support in areas they needed it, and tools to enable them to feel more positively about their school experience.

The strength from this project was the support from the girls. They engaged very well and were proud of their opinions of their school spaces. It was very interesting to hear their views and to engage with them on a level where they felt comfortable to talk freely about how they felt in different spaces. The way in which they were all happy to share, and excited for me to offer their artefacts to the project was very encouraging. The freedom for them to express their feelings and be listened to was a wonderful opportunity for both the girls and myself. I took away the feeling that they liked to be listened to and have their views respected and were able to delve deeper into how they view their surroundings, and how they feel at the place they spend the majority of their time. I was honoured to explore the different responses, and converse with them in a subject that isn't necessarily a frequent topic.

Although this study moved away from ASD before it began, it is concerning to know that some of the girls feel they have nobody to play with, or need to eat their lunch alone. There were instances where they felt nervous about approaching certain offices and hopefully, once discussed with the school, these issues can be resolved. However, it poses the question of how many girls feel anxious, nervous or worried at school and do they go unnoticed? Bearing in mind the study was just a tiny target group of 15 girls, how many other girls are there out there that feel the same way, and if I hadn't asked how they felt about those spaces, would they have talked to someone about these feelings?

Following on, I hope that my study can be used for further research to help staff to understand the different feelings that children have about the same spaces. It may help in the future to identify those children that need some support within school.

## References:

### Online Articles:

Dean, M., Harwood, R., Kasari, C. (2017) 'The art of camouflage: Gender differences in the social behaviors of girls and boys with autism spectrum disorder. Vol. 21 (6) 678-689. DOI: 10.1177/1362361316671845. (Last accessed on 24/05/2021).

Gray, L., Bownas, E., Hicks, L., Hutcheson – Galbraith, E., Harrison, S. (2021) 'Towards a better understanding of girls on the Autism spectrum: educational support and parental perspectives. *Educational Psychology in Practise*, 37:1, 74-93, DOI: 10.1080/02667363.2020.1863188 (Last accessed: 24/05/2021).

Lai, M.C. *et al* (2015) Sex/Gender differences and autism: setting the scene for future research. As cited in Tierney, S., Burns, J., Kilbey, E. (2015) 'Looking behind the mask: Social coping strategies of girls on the autistic spectrum'. *Research in autism spectrum disorders*, 2016-03, Vol.23, p.73-83. DOI: 10.1016/j.rasd.2015.11.013. Accessed 01/03/2021.

Moyse, R. & Porter, J. (2015) 'The experience of the hidden curriculum for autistic girls at mainstream primary schools', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 30:2, 187-201, DOI: 10,1080/08856257.2014.986915 (Last accessed 23/05/2021).

Ratto, A.B., Kenworthy, L., Yerys, B.E., Bascom, J., Wieckowski Trubanov, A., White, S.W., Wallace, G, L., Pugliese, C., Schultz, R T., Ollendick T, H., Scarpa, A., Seese, S., Register – Brown, K., Martin, A., Gutermuth Anthony, L. (2018) 'What About the Girls? Sex-Based Differences in Autistic Traits and Adaptive Skills'. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3413-9>. (Last accessed on 18/05/2021).

Sutherland, R., Hodge, A., Bruck, S., Costley, D., Klieve, H. (2017) 'Parent-reported differences between school-aged girls and boys on the autism spectrum'. Vol. 21 (6) 785 – 794. DOI: 10.1177/1362361316668653. (Last accessed on 06/05/2021).

Tierney, S., Burns, J., Kilbey, E. (2015) 'Looking behind the mask: Social coping strategies of girls on the autistic spectrum'. *Research in autism spectrum disorders*, 2016-03, Vol.23, p.73-83. DOI: 10.1016/j.rasd.2015.11.013. (Last accessed 06/05/2021)..



### Module References:

Bucknall, S. (2009) cited in 'Doing qualitative research with children and young people' in Fraser, S. Flewitt, R & Hammersley M (ed) *Understanding Research with Children and Young People*. London. Sage Publications. P 76-80.

Clark, A. (2010) & (2014) cited in 'Developing and Adapting the Mosaic Approach' in Fraser, S. Flewitt, R & Hammersley M (ed) *Understanding Research with Children and Young People*. London. Sage Publications. P.200-207.

Clark, A & Moss, P. (2001) cited in 'What is research with children and young people?' in Fraser, S. Flewitt, R & Hammersley M (ed) *Understanding Research with Children and Young People*. London. Sage Publications. P.43.

Flewitt, R (2006) cited in 'Interviews' in Fraser, S. Flewitt, R & Hammersley M (ed) *Understanding Research with Children and Young People*. London. Sage Publications. P.140, 143.

Hall, S. (ed) (1997) cited in 'Working with Texts, Images and Artefacts in Fraser, S. Flewitt, R & Hammersley M (ed) *Understanding Research with Children and Young People*. London. Sage Publications. P.157.

Hearn, H & Thompson, P. (2014) cited in 'Working with Texts, Images and Artefacts in Fraser, S. Flewitt, R & Hammersley M (ed) *Understanding Research with Children and Young People*. London. Sage Publications. P.157.

Langsted, O. (1994) cited in 'What is research with children and young people?' in Fraser, S. Flewitt, R & Hammersley M (ed) *Understanding Research with Children and Young People*. London. Sage Publications. P.43.

Montgomery, H. (2014) 'Participant Observation' in Clark, A., Flewitt, R., Hammersley, M. and Robb, M. (eds) (2014) *Understanding Research with Children and Young People*. London: Sage in association with The Open University, pp.122-135

Montgomery, H. (2014) cited in 'Participant Observation' in Fraser, S. Flewitt, R & Hammersley M (ed) *Understanding Research with Children and Young People*. London. Sage Publications. P.131.

### Online Module Materials:

Crivello and Murray (2012) The Value of Childhood and Youth Research [Unit 3 The value of childhood and youth research: 3.3 Links between research policy and practice \(open.ac.uk\)](#) available at <https://learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=1628054&selection=1.5>