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Supporting mainstream school staff in England to meet the needs and address educational inequalities in autistic girls

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ABSTRACT

Autistic girls often experience educational inequalities and inadequate support in schools that lead to poor educational, health and wellbeing outcomes. In response, education policy requires mainstream schools to adopt inclusive practices for children and young people (CYP) with special educational needs and disabilities, including autistic CYP, where possible. However, teachers report complex barriers to inclusive practice provision, including a lack of training and resources, mental health deterioration among CYP post-pandemic and a lack of how to support autistic girls to engage in mainstream education. This study adopted a neurodiversity approach to explore challenges that 17 mainstream school staff faced and provides recommendations for inclusive practices for autistic girls in mainstream schools. Three themes and one subtheme were developed through thematic analysis of interview and group interview data: (1) Ineffective and inconsistent training; (2) Time as a barrier (subtheme: Pastoral support demands and mental exhaustion); (3) Future training recommendations. Future research should explore how to tailor training to staff needs and the specific needs of ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ autistic girls. Recommendations will have practical significance in advancing understanding of action that must be taken in schools and by policymakers to achieve inclusive practices for autistic girls in mainstream education settings.

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Introduction

Autism is considered a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by challenges with social interaction, communication and restrictive, repetitive behaviours (American Psychological Association (APA) 2013). Characteristic presentation varies between individuals and is misunderstood and underdiagnosed in girls and women (Happé and Frith 2020). The terms females, girls, and women in this paper refer to those whose sex, or 'set of biological attributes associated with physical and physiological features', is assigned

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female at birth (Heidari et al. 2016, 1). Sex was selected as research widely demonstrates sex differences in the characteristics and impact of autism (e.g. Napolitano et al. 2022).

An estimated 700,000 people are autistic in the UK (National Autistic Society 2024). This figure is likely modest as an estimated 75% of autistic girls are undiagnosed (National Autistic Society 2023a). Causes of missed and delayed diagnosis include diagnostic overshadowing, exclusion of females in research that also underpins diagnostic criteria, inaccurate beliefs that autism is a predominantly male condition, and masking – behaviours that conceal autistic behaviours (Happé and Frith 2020). Reports show that society and professionals generally lack an understanding of autism, specifically in (Gray et al. 2021). This can lead to the absence of much-needed support and educational inequalities (Carpenter, Happe, and Egerton 2019). Efforts to address these educational inequalities in mainstream education are reflected by the introduction of the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education (DfE) 2014), which stipulates students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including autistic students, should be accommodated in mainstream education where possible (DfE 2014). However, this poses challenges for mainstream schools around meeting the needs of autistic girls. These challenges are complex and intersectional and must be explored and understood to address such inequalities urgently.

Autism: deficit or difference?

Understanding of autism varies widely, with more recent calls that challenge and reject traditional deficit-based approaches that assume a set of symptoms negatively impact the daily lives of autistic individuals (APA 2013). Instead, the neurodiversity movement has prompted a neurodiversity approach, whereby it is assumed that autistic individuals are different rather than deficient. This approach recognises that the environment is built for neurotypical individuals, those who represent the societal 'norm', leading to challenges for autistic individuals (Kapp 2020). Adoption of a neurodiversity approach may encourage more affirmative language use, recognition and channelling of individual strengths. Such approaches have been shown to have a positive impact on the quality of life, well-being, anxiety, depression, and stress in autistic populations (Naylor 2023; van Heijst and Geurts 2015).

Educational inequalities in autistic girls in mainstream school settings

Autistic girls are typically more vulnerable to mental health challenges, self-harm, eating disorders (Baldwin and Costley 2015; Sproston, Sedgewick, and Crane 2017) and negative educational experiences (Carpenter, Happe, and Egerton 2019). Therefore, addressing their support needs in mainstream schools is essential and has the power to improve around 70% of educational experiences in autistic girls (National Autistic Society 2021).

Autistic voices must be involved in bridging the gap between education policy and practice (StEvens 2022). This can be achieved through qualitative research that explores educational inequalities faced by autistic girls from multiple and diverse perspectives. Such existing evidence shows that support for autistic girls in mainstream education is inadequate, which is often attributed to teachers' lack of understanding of autism in girls

(e.g. Holmes 2022; Ward and Powell 2025). Evidence shows that the needs of autistic girls in mainstream schools are often not met, with reports from autistic girls themselves stating they feel that teachers and school staff do not understand them or their needs (Sproston, Sedgewick, and Crane 2017). Therefore, mainstream school teachers' voices must also be heard to ensure an inclusive school environment for the autistic girls they are responsible for.

Concerns have been raised around the implementation and lack of success of the SEND Code of Practice in mainstream schools by autistic students themselves (e.g. McAllister and Sloan 2016), their parents and carers (e.g. Connolly and Gersch 2016; Pillay, Brownlow, and March 2020), and mainstream education teachers (e.g. Feldman et al. 2019). It is difficult to define 'success' with regard to the SEND Code of Practice implementation (Ofsted 2021). However, unequivocal evidence demonstrates a lack of success in terms of education inequalities for autistic students (Chapman 2021): Autistic students are twice as likely to be excluded from mainstream school than their peers when teachers are not adequately trained, only 26% of autistic children are reported to be happy at school, three in four parents of autistic children believe their child's needs are not met in mainstream schools (Mon-Williams, Shore, and Wood 2024; National Autistic Society 2023b) and autistic students' educational outcomes are often inferior to their non-autistic peers (DfE 2024). This leads to poor psychological well-being and increased future risk of involvement with the criminal justice system, anti-social behaviours, and limited social capital (Atfield, Baldauf, and Owe 2021). Therefore, training for teachers to support autistic pupils and reduce these educational inequalities is vital, especially as one of the biggest influences on educational and social outcomes is the behaviour and practices of teachers (Efthymiou and Kington 2017). The growing number of autistic girls in mainstream education in England (Dfe 2024), the under-recognition and support of female autistic students and the lack of confidence in teachers to provide this support (Gray et al. 2021) demonstrate an urgent need to provide appropriate training to empower teachers to support and improve outcomes for autistic girls (Carpenter, Happe, and Egerton 2019; Mon-Williams, Shore, and Wood 2024).

The impact on autistic students in mainstream education is marked and includes social isolation, higher instances of bullying, avoidable sensory overload experiences and sub-optimal educational outcomes (McAllister and Sloan 2016; Ward and Powell 2025). Although this refers to male and female autistic students, these issues are perpetuated in autistic girls by their unique and often misunderstood needs. Recent systematic review evidence shows that autistic girls often require specific and tailored school support for challenges with peer relationships, transitions between education levels, self-advocacy and sense of belonging (Ayirebi and Thomas 2024). Autistic girls are reported to be more likely to experience challenges with self-acceptance and their mental health (Jones 2025). Such challenges can be exacerbated by the high incidence of masking in autistic girls. This exacerbation often results from such behaviours, leading to missed or delayed diagnosis and subsequent support (Halsall 2020). Consequently, staff need to understand how to support autistic girls and their unique support needs.

Barriers to inclusive mainstream education provision

The demands posed by the SEND Code of Practice place excessive pressure (Hellawell 2015) on teachers and mainstream school staff who report feeling unprepared and

unsupported to provide inclusive education for autistic girls (NASUWT 2021; Tomlinson, Bond, and Hebron 2021). However, it is not as simple as more training for teachers. Barriers to undertaking such training include a lack of time and competing priorities (Suhrheinrich et al. 2021) that lead to a 'postcode lottery' of available support (Azpitarte and Holt 2023). Relatedly, challenges are reported with translating support strategies into practice, such as a lack of time, resources and staff and competing priorities and expectations (NASUWT 2022; Suhrheinrich et al. 2021; Warnes, Done, and Knowler 2022). It has also been posited that staff most passionate about delivering inclusive education are most susceptible to burnout (Holmqvist and Lelinge 2020). Therefore, it is not only essential to understand the training needs of school staff, but also how this can be feasibly delivered and implemented.

Evidence shows a widespread lack of understanding and support for autistic girls in mainstream education. This can be perpetuated by a SEND Code of Practice (Dfe 2014) that places often impossible demands on teachers and staff. Qualitative evidence can help us understand how to address this issue. However, much of this existing evidence refers to autistic communities as a homogenous population. Although the voices of girls and women are emerging more in recent years, their voices are still underrepresented in research. Societal developments mean we must continue to gather this evidence to ensure recommendations are practicable and meet the needs of autistic girls and staff in the present day. Therefore, this study aims to address the following research question:

What support do mainstream school staff in England require to meet the needs and address educational inequalities in autistic girls?

This study explores and synthesises challenges faced by mainstream school staff concerning the support provision for autistic girls. Recommendations are also made for schools and policymakers that will have practical significance around the advancement of inclusive practices in mainstream education that aim to benefit autistic girls and improve their educational outcomes.

Methodology

It is important to share the positionality of the authors of this work. Lead author (MW) has personal experience where she observed the considerable teacher workload and lack of SEND support within mainstream schools. She has also witnessed the impact this can have on autistic students when she worked as a personal assistant. Here, she gained insights into the negative impact a lack of staff understanding of autistic girls can have on CYP's mental health. A notable observation of (MW) was that although challenges faced by school staff and families share similarities, such as inadequate support for autistic girls in mainstream schools, each individual is impacted differently. Co-author (LP) is a late-diagnosed woman with autism and ADHD and thus navigated mainstream education without diagnoses or subsequent support, something she is passionate about addressing for future generations. Authors' positionality is of value and considered a strength of this work as such insider perspective work as such insider perspectives are deemed valuable and provide unique insights for research compared to those without lived experiences (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al. 2023; Braun and Clarke 2021; Sonuga-

Barke and Thapar 2021). Therefore, this research adopted a neurodiversity approach whereby autism is considered a difference rather than a set of deficits (Kapp 2020).

Methods

Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling strategies. This involved sending recruitment advertisements to mainstream schools and individuals in England with whom the authors had pre-existing relationships. These contacts were also asked to share the advertisements with their contacts. Inclusion criteria required participants to be current or recent (within the last five years) mainstream primary and/or secondary teachers, including supply teachers, or non-teaching staff in England. 'Non-teaching staff' included teaching assistants, pastoral support staff and mentors, who had frequent contact with students in one-to-one or group settings. Administrative staff, such as receptionists, were not included. This project chose to include staff from both secondary and primary schools to enable preliminary observations to be obtained. These observations may be particularly valuable because autistic girls are often diagnosed later than boys, often during secondary school, and their challenges can become more apparent during secondary school, such as when navigating adolescent social relationships (e.g. Bauminger et al. 2007; Begeer et al. 2013; Urbaniak and D'Amico 2024).

Procedure

Ethical approval was gained from the University Ethics Committee (Reference: 058311). Following recruitment and the gaining of informed consent, participants were invited to take part in either an online semi-structured individual or group interview, depending on their availability. The group interviews were limited to a maximum of five participants, and quieter participants were encouraged to share their thoughts. These interviews were audio recorded using Google Meet and transcribed verbatim. The predetermined questions covered the exploration of the perceptions of participants' needs regarding teaching and supporting autistic female students in primary and secondary education in England. Primary and secondary staff were asked similar, but different questions, out of recognition of the differences in educational environment and practices. Open-ended questions covered participants' (i) understanding of sex differences in autism; (iii) training received, and (iv) supporting autistic girls in schools. ii) experiences of teaching and supporting autistic female students, and (iii) training received. Prompts and probes were used when required to gain deeper insights into topics raised by participants. The interviews were conducted by two postgraduate students. Due to time constraints, member checking was not completed, however, participants were sent a summary of the analysis findings to enable them to provide feedback if desired.

Data analysis

The transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke (2021) six phases of reflexive thematic analysis. This process involved the author (MW) reviewing transcripts and audio recordings to make initial observations and identify semantic codes. The codes were then reviewed, and preliminary themes were identified across the transcripts. These themes

were refined in collaboration with the co-author (LP) to ensure they were relevant and represented prominent patterns. For example, originally, *Future Training Recommendations* included a sub-theme of the *Importance of the Individual;* however, upon review, this sub-theme did not have sufficient supporting evidence from participants.

Findings

Twelve interviews and two group interviews were conducted with 17 participants (see Table 1).

Through a reflexive thematic analysis, three themes and one sub-theme were identified from the data (see Figure 1).

Ineffective and inconsistent training

Awareness, understanding and training to enable staff to support autistic females were limited in primary and secondary settings. Participants shared that the quality of the training posed challenges regarding the translation of learning into practice. Both secondary and primary staff reported varied training, with some reporting very little:

> 'Autism (training)? Er … if it was mentioned, it probably would have been like, half a day … maybe an hour or two in the whole year' (PL).

Training for supply staff may be particularly overlooked, as one participant described receiving no training before beginning their role as a supply teaching assistant working with students with SEND. Therefore, it may be important to target training

Table 1. Participant demographic information.

Participant (*P*)	Current Role	Primary or Secondary experience	Length of Time in Profession
PA	Ex-teacher/Assistant Educational Psychologist	Secondary	Qualified for 14 years (Left profession in 2020)
PB	Sixth Form Assistant Head/ English Teacher	Secondary	20 years
PC	French Teacher	Secondary	35 years
PD	Teaching Assistant	Secondary	1 year
PE	Assistant SENCo	Secondary	3 months, following 15 years as a Teaching Assistant
PF	Supply Teaching Assistant	Secondary	7 months
PG	Trainee Maths Teacher	Secondary	2 years
PH	Trainee Maths Teacher	Secondary	2 years
PI	Head of Social Science	Secondary	14 years
PJ	One-to-One Mentor	Secondary	6 months
PK	English and Drama Teacher	Secondary	22 years
PL	Teacher	Primary	5 years
PM	Teacher	Primary	1 year
PN	Teacher	Primary	3 years
PO	Teacher	Primary	2 years
PP	Supply Teacher	Primary	2 years
PQ	Supply Teacher	Primary	1 year

Autistic girls often experience educational inequalities and inadequate support in schools that lead to poor educational, health and wellbeing outcomes. In response, education policy requires mainstream schools to adopt inclusive practices for children and young people (CYP) with special educational needs and disabilities, including autistic CYP, where possible.

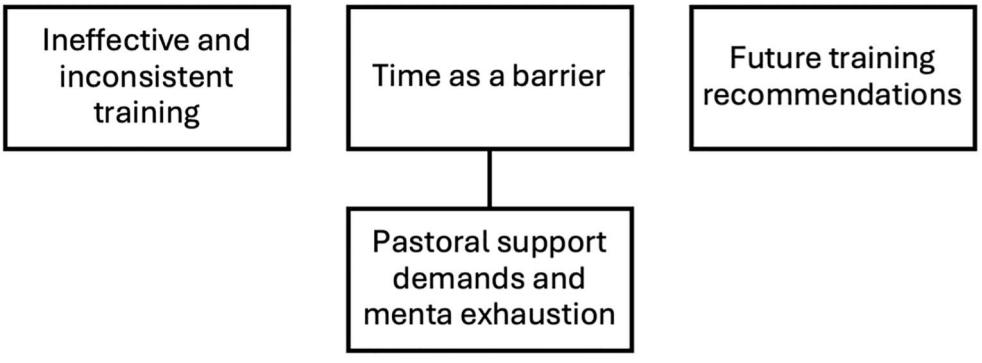

Figure 1. Summary of themes.

to supply staff who may be excluded from training received by permanent members of staff.

> 'They gave me the option of doing an unpaid day shadowing … then they just kind of threw me in the deep end … I didn't even know that I'd be working with SEND children.' (PF)

Amongst secondary staff, there were notable differences in experience and engagement between staff with different levels of experience and student teachers. For instance, two experienced participants stated that autism training had been 'non-existent' (PA) and that they received 'nothing' (PC) early in their careers. However, they reported that autism training was now more available.

> 'I would say that probably in my career there hasn't been that much … I did have some training this year, which I was actually quite impressed with' (PI).

These comparisons suggest that the availability of general autism training has increased within secondary schools; however, for the primary school participants, training was considered to be available and extensive, particularly during initial teacher training, but the practical application and value of the training were considered to be lacking.

> 'When we had the lecture on behaviour management, I was like "ah, this is great. It will be so useful", when actually … no. It's not enough' (PQ)

> 'When I was doing my PGCE, I was quite optimistic … You learn about all these theories … and then you think 'oh wow', that sounds brilliant … and then … you realise that … they're not feasible' (PL).

Although most participants had completed general autism training, training specifically related to autism in girls continued to be fairly limited.

> 'Unless you sort of go to something that's specifically oriented towards autism in girls … I don't think it gets mentioned at all' (PG)

Despite the limited training, some participants felt confident working with autistic girls, due to personal experiences (PI, PC, PD) or training sourced outside of school (PC, PL, PM, PN), often financed by the participants themselves:

> 'I did some training as well, just out of interest, to find out more about it for my daughter, and obviously because I had personal experience with it, I wanted to find out more' (PC).

These findings suggest that generic autism training has increased, most notably for secondary staff, however, the practical applications were questioned by primary staff, and training rarely acknowledged or explored gender/sex differences.

Time as a barrier

Time was reported to be a substantial barrier for both primary and secondary school staff. Secondary participants described that despite having the desire to do so, they lacked the time to engage in continued professional development (CPD) to upskill themselves regarding supporting autistic students:

> 'Time is definitely one of them because an optional course comes probably right down at the bottom as much as we would love to have a lot more knowledge' (PE).

Both primary and secondary participants lacked the time to provide the support they knew was required for autistic female students. This finding suggests that, whilst training is important, strategies recommended need to be feasible within the mainstream context.

> 'You can't split yourself into thirty … you find that you're either putting everything into that one child … then you see the other children aren't getting that time spent with them' (PO).

Pastoral support demands and mental exhaustion

Secondary teachers shared that the lack of time was influenced by the demands of pastoral care and supporting neurodivergent students. This aspect was mentally draining, and the rising pastoral care demand had led to compassion fatigue, whereby teachers were beginning to take mental health and wellbeing issues less seriously.

> 'Since the pandemic, there's been an increase in mental health problems … people are almost getting to the point where they've almost got a bit of a fatigue with it and their willingness as teachers to take it seriously is a bit of an issue' (PI)

> 'So many of my colleagues will say, I can't do any more pastorally. "I'm not a social worker," you hear that a lot'(PC)

For primary teachers, the pastoral burden was heightened by the demands of parental relationships, where parents would seek support from them or act as a barrier for students accessing diagnoses and support.

> A lot of my role was supporting parents … I would have parents coming to have a meeting and just vent' (PL).

> 'Some parents who don't want to accept that their child needs extra help' (PO)

Systemic issues within the NHS (England's healthcare system) were also argued to contribute to this mental load. The extensive waiting lists for autism diagnoses and mental health support were a barrier to additional support within the school. For example, one student was not eligible to receive SEND support until they received a diagnosis.

> 'She doesn't get any support now … in terms of the school's SEND support and teaching assistants … there isn't really anything … ' (PH)

Future training recommendations

Based on their experiences and the barriers impacting access to and engagement in training and support, participants outlined how training should be designed, delivered and formatted. Both primary and secondary school staff (PA, PB, PC, PE, PL) suggested that future training should be 'drip fed' (PC) and implemented in short, but frequent, dedicated CPD time and not delivered after a working day when staff lacked the energy and time to engage.

> 'After school training sessions … are a drag, it's like the graveyard shift, everybody's absolutely shattered afterwards' (PE)

In terms of the content of training, participants (PA, PD, PF, PI) had varied suggestions depending on their previous training and overall perceived confidence. For those who shared that they had very little training on autism and autism in girls (PA, PF), basic and introductory training was suggested.

> 'Something that perhaps starts right from the beginning. 'What is autism like?' 'How does it present differently from boys to girls?'' (PA)

For staff who had received more training, they recommended training on how to identify autism among girls, particularly when masking is present.

> 'If we could have more specific training on autism and girls that would be good … how to spot it or how it might present … because it is so difficult sometimes to spot it and then it goes under the radar.' (PD)

In terms of their ability to teach and support autistic female students, six participants shared that they felt understanding the student's individual needs was important (PA, PE, PF, PG, PI, PL). Therefore, they felt training should be tailored to the individual schools and students, and acknowledge that autism may present differently among different individuals.

> 'the one size fits all approach, chuck it out the window because every student … has got their individual needs' (PE)

Discussion

This study adopted a neurodiversity approach to exploration of intersectionalities between the demands placed on mainstream school staff by educational policy, inadequate support provision for autistic girls in mainstream education and barriers to staff's ability to receive, engage with and or implement training into practice. Recommendations are made for future research, policy development and practice in mainstream education.

Findings identified that mainstream teachers and staff lacked training and support to help them understand and support female autistic students in mainstream education settings. Training provision that did exist varied between schools and was reported to be scarcer for teachers who qualified in the last 10 years. Those who were more confident in supporting female autistic students reported personal experiences and or seeking their own training.

Ineffective and inconsistent training

Consistent with previous research, participants in this study reported limited and inconsistent training, contributing to a lack of confidence to understand and support female autistic students (McGhie-Richmond et al. 2013; Nwoko et al. 2019). Evidence also suggests that not only is training lacking and inadequate, sufficient time is not available to engage in training following qualification, and initial teacher training does not equip teachers to support students with SEND (Young, Mannix McNamara, and Coughlan 2017).

Participants in the present study who reported feeling more confident in their abilities to support female autistic students either had their own personal experiences or had sought their own training. Relatedly, existing evidence shows that increased confidence is associated with greater experience rather than expertise or training. This suggests that training should involve hands-on and applied experiences where trainee teachers work directly with autistic students. This is supported by literature that argues raising awareness and understanding of autism in girls is not enough, and that application of this knowledge into practice is essential to enable appropriate support provision (Lukens and McFarlane 2006; Palli 2017).

Time as a barrier

Participants reported a lack of time to engage in training or to implement support strategies in practice. This reflects wider reports from teacher unions and the DfE where it is shown that 80% of teachers report their workload have increased and half of teachers describe the negative impact this has on their physical and mental health (NASUWT 2022; DfE 2024; National Education Union (NEU) 2024). This has worsened following the COVID-19 pandemic and has led to two thirds of staff to consider leaving the profession (NASUWT 2022; NEU 2024).

Pastoral support demands and mental exhaustion

Although pastoral care is part of the teacher role in England (DfE 2011), results of this study highlighted the demands placed on staff due to supporting their students pastoral needs, something that can lead to burnout and mental exhaustion. This has worsened post COVID-19 pandemic (Gould 2023). This is particularly pertinent for female autistic students as their pastoral support needs are likely greater than their non-autistic peers due to increased vulnerabilities to anxiety, social challenges and sexual vulnerabilities (Estrin et al. 2020). The supporting systematic review (n = 12) acknowledged the emotional demands of teachers. Here, an association was identified between emotional labour, ('the effort, planning and control needed to express organizationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions') and burnout, ('prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors') (Kariou et al. 2021, 2, p3).

Participants reported that, as schools are often unable to provide additional support or resources for an autistic child before they receive a diagnosis, they are limited in what support they can provide. This poses challenges as 75% of autistic girls are estimated to be undiagnosed while autism assessment referrals in CYP have increased by 306% post pandemic, and more than 93% of CYP do not receive an appointment within the

recommended 13 weeks of referral (Mon-Williams, Shore, and Wood 2024; National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) 2011). This potentially leaves thousands of CYP without adequate support. Despite the rising problem of meeting pastoral needs, the DfE (2024) released guidance to reduce teachers' physical workload, and failed to acknowledge the barriers, emotional demands and consequences this has for staff.

Strengths and limitations of this study

This study presents complex intersections of inequalities in education provision for female autistic students and staff's abilities to deliver appropriate support to address these inequities. This involved listening to the voices of mainstream school staff to explore how these inequalities can be addressed, including practical solutions and recommendations. Findings have the potential to inform training provision and development for mainstream school staff to enable them to meet the needs of their female autistic students (Gillespie-Lynch et al. 2017).

There are, however, notable limitations of this work. The use of snowball sampling may be considered as a limitation, as sampling was dependent on the authors' contacts and connections. For example, the majority of participants reflected the research team's existing contacts and were thus based in South Yorkshire and Lincolnshire areas. Although it could be argued that this creates sampling bias and limits the generalisability of the findings, the aim of the project was achieved: to capture insights into perspectives and experiences of mainstream school staff and teachers in England.

Additionally, this study focused on the voice of mainstream school staff to explore barriers and potential solutions to training and addressing inequalities in education provision for autistic girls. Voices from other groups such as autistic girls, their families and policymakers were not included. Topics around more marginalised groups of autistic girls were not discussed. This is important as autistic people from ethnic minority backgrounds and LGBTQ + communities can have different and additional support needs (Mon-Williams, Shore, and Wood 2024).

Future training recommendations

Participants in the present study were asked what they felt future training should involve, and the following recommendations were made with reference to existing supporting evidence:

- **Training development:** This should involve a neurodiversity approach whereby strengths and differences are recognised rather than focussing on deficits (Kapp 2020). Co-production methods should be adopted to develop training placing voices of lived experience at the centre (Gillespie-Lynch et al. 2017). This includes families, teachers, autistic girls, and other staff who may receive the training to help ensure such training is suitable, accessible and practical (Mon-Williams, Shore, and Wood 2024).

- **Frequency and length of training:** Training should be short and frequent in acknowledgement of the benefits of learning in short bursts, and heavy teacher workload that may not allow for larger training sessions (Warnes, Done, and Knowler 2022).
- **When training should be delivered:** Dedicated training time should be provided for staff and should not be delivered at the end of the school day when staff are exhausted and less able to engage.
- **Training content:**

○ **Introductory training** is needed to improve understanding of how autism presents in girls, followed by training that explores **support strategies.** This was also recommended in a recent parliamentary report based on evidence from over fifty academics (Mon-Williams, Shore, and Wood 2024). This can also improve support and reduce education inequalities (Featherstone et al. 2021; Smith 2023).

○ **Specific challenges in autistic girls:** Training should include awareness and understanding of such issues as well as strategies to support them within mainstream education. These challenges may include well-being, self-advocacy skills and social skills (Clarke 2022; Mon-Williams, Shore, and Wood 2024).

○ **Importance of the individual:** Training should acknowledge that each autistic person is different and simply learning about autism in girls is not enough. Therefore, training should explore how teachers and staff can tailor their support to the individual (Bobb 2019; Carpenter, Happe, and Egerton 2019).

○ **Hands-on experience** should be included in training to support staff to translate learning into practice (Lukens and McFarlane 2006; Palli 2017).

Future research and implications

Future research should, where practicable, involve the voices of autistic girls, teachers and the staff who support them, adopt a neurodiversity approach and recognise cognitive difference rather than deficits. Involving the voices of autistic people benefits their quality of life and self-esteem which is typically low in autistic girls (van Heijst and Geurts 2015). Future work should also include autistic girls from more marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities and LGBTQ + groups to ensure their needs are also considered and met.

It would be valuable to explore how such training should be delivered and if this varies by context such as differing demographic composition of students and staff between schools and primary versus secondary provision. Value would be added if individual learning needs of staff were explored when developing and delivering training. This would not only address educational inequalities in autistic girls, but would also provide training that staff can optimally engage with.

Future policy should acknowledge the emotional challenges and demands such as those caused by students increasing pastoral support needs described by participants in this study. This may include introduction of staff in schools whose roles are solely to provide student pastoral support.

Lastly, the findings of this study have important implications for stakeholders, including policymakers, teacher training providers, teachers, school staff autistic girls and their families. These findings could influence future research and contribute to essential

conversations and action to reduce educational inequalities and improve outcomes for female autistic students in mainstream education.

Conclusions

This research adopted a neurodiversity approach to explore the perceptions of seventeen mainstream school teachers and staff in England regarding what they need to support female autistic students. The findings of this study indicate that centring voices of teachers and staff in research can reveal important barriers and potential solutions to educational inequalities faced by autistic girls.

Participants revealed complex intersectionalities between demands placed on them by policy, inadequate support provision for autistic girls in mainstream settings and their inability to receive, engage with and or implement training into practice. The latter is reported to result from matters outside of their control such as school infrastructure, increasing numbers of autistic girls in mainstream education and deteriorating mental health and subsequent increase of pastoral support needs in students post-pandemic. This demonstrates an urgent requirement to address challenges faced by education professionals, to reduce educational inequalities and improve outcomes in autistic girls in mainstream education. The findings of this study can improve outcomes for autistic girls through influencing future research and contributing to essential conversations and decisive action to reduce educational inequalities and improve outcomes for autistic girls in mainstream education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics approval statement

Ethical approval was obtained through the University of Sheffield EnBloc Ethics Application (Application Reference: 050120).

Notes on contributors

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Dr Lauren Powell is a lecturer in Psychology and Education and holds a BSc (Hons) degree in Psychology, MSc in Psychological research and a PhD in Health Psychology. She is passionate about and has worked for many years to place the voices of young people at the centre of her research through the use of innovative participatory methods. Dr Powell has also been involved in contributions to parliamentary reports in England that make recommendations around support

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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