



'I Couldn't tell the Teachers About it': Autistic Students' Experiences of Bullying and Exclusion in Post-Primary Schools

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Abstract

Bullying and exclusion in school environments have significant psychological, social, and academic consequences for post-primary attending students. Autistic students are disproportionately affected by bullying, particularly during adolescence, a period marked by increasing social complexity and heightened peer scrutiny. In this study, data collected on the lived experiences of 18 autistic students in post-primary schools in Ireland were analysed for reports of bullying experiences in educational contexts. Bullying and exclusion emerged as a highly relevant experience for nine (50%) of the students in the study indicating the pervasiveness of bullying experiences among autistic students. Under the major theme of overt bullying and exclusion, three subthemes were constructed: (1) lack of teacher and institutional support, (2) misconceptions about autism, and (3) adverse wellbeing and mental health impacts. The findings highlight the importance of tailoring anti-bullying measures in schools to include the perspectives of autistic students and their families. The findings further indicate that teachers must have knowledge of autism and of the impact of bullying and exclusion on the mental health and school experiences of autistic students to build inclusive school environments and prevent bullying of neurodivergent students in post-primary schools.

Keywords Autism · Students · School experiences · Bullying · Exclusion · Post-primary

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School bullying is defined as a damaging social process that is characterised by an imbalance of power driven by societal and institutional norms: bullying is often repeated and manifests as unwanted interpersonal behaviour among students or school personnel that causes physical, social, and emotional harm to the targeted individuals or groups, and the wider school community (UNESCO Chair on Bullying and Cyberbullying, 2024). This can include overt and direct aggressive acts such as physical or verbal abuse and indirect aggressive acts such as spreading malicious rumours and deliberate avoidance (Rigby, 2017), as well as less visible forms of bullying such as social exclusion (Anti-Bullying Centre, 2023). Bullying in school environments is pervasive with significant psychological, social, and academic consequences for students. For example, between 30% and 60% of school-aged children and young people are estimated to experience bullying (Molcho et al., 2009) though there is significant global variation in reports of bullying (Biswas et al., 2020).

Among vulnerable populations, autistic students are disproportionately affected by bullying, particularly during adolescence, a period marked by increasing social complexity and heightened peer scrutiny (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Sterzing et al., 2012). Autistic children and young people experience significantly higher rates of bullying compared to their neurotypical peers (Badger et al., 2024; Bejerot & Mörtberg, 2009; Humphrey & Symes, 2011; Park et al., 2020; Paul et al., 2018; Sreckovic et al., 2014; Symes & Humphrey, 2010). Recent studies report a 2.4 times greater risk of experiencing bullying for autistic students compared to neurotypical peers and double the rate seen in students with other disabilities (Park et al., 2020; Badger et al., 2024). Arguably, mainstream post-primary education settings present unique social challenges, including larger school environments, increased autonomy as students move into adolescence, and reduced adult supervision and interaction, which may contribute to increased bullying risk for autistic students (Van Roekel et al., 2010). Thus, research consistently indicates that autistic students in mainstream settings experience significantly higher rates of peer bullying than their neurotypical peers, and at higher rates than autistic students in special education settings (Zablotsky et al., 2014).

A systematic review and meta-analysis by Trundle et al. (2023) reported a 39% prevalence of bullying (and sexual or crime) experiences among autistic children. Using a large sample in the United States ($N=1,221$), Zablotsky et al. (2014) found that 63% of autistic children aged between six and 15 years had experienced bullying, with 38% experiencing bullying within the month preceding data collection. Predictors of bullying experiences included socioeconomic challenges and co-occurring neurodivergences, psychiatric conditions and psycho-social disabilities. Public school attendance and mainstream educational classrooms heightened risks for experiencing bullying, particularly in middle school (Zablotsky et al., 2014). In a longitudinal study with data collected at two time points, Rodriguez et al. (2021) also found a high prevalence of bullying experiences among young autistic children aged 5 to 12 years (39–41% annually). Many of the experiences were chronic, with older children, children considered to have more autism characteristics, and higher internalising and externalising mental health difficulties more likely to have experienced bullying. However, while experiencing bullying was linked to increased anxiety, having a pre-existing mental health difficulty did not predict future bullying (Rodriguez et al., 2021). This suggests that experiencing bullying may increase the likelihood of poorer mental health outcomes such as increased anxiety.

Research suggests that autistic students frequently experience bullying in forms such as social exclusion, emotional

bullying, and verbal harassment (Park et al., 2020). The psychological toll of such bullying is severe: Holden et al. (2020) reported that experiencing bullying nearly doubled the risk of suicidality among autistic adolescent, and Ochi et al. (2020) identified bullying as a major driver of school avoidance in both autistic boys and girls. Bitsika et al. (2022) further explored the link between bullying, school avoidance, and anxiety in autistic boys aged six to 18 years. Among their participants ($N=71$), 82% reported having experienced bullying, and 55% were starting to avoid school (Bitsika et al., 2022). In a qualitative study with 20 autistic teenagers about their experiences of masking, the experience or fear of being bullied was a key motivator of masking, which was described as “a conditioned response driven by need and safety” (Chapman et al., 2022). Despite these documented risks to, and impact on, autistic students’ mental health and wellbeing, the experiences of autistic post-primary students remain under examined in educational contexts, and much of the literature relies on parental and teacher reports of autistic students’ experiences of school-based bullying (Rodriguez et al., 2021).

Current Study

The research literature underscores the importance of including autistic students’ perspectives in research on bullying in school contexts and incorporating these findings into anti-bullying strategies. Research is particularly needed on the experiences of underrepresented groups, including autistic girls (Ratto et al., 2018). Self-reports of bullying experiences by autistic students themselves, and self-reports of the impact of these experiences, are necessary for advancing our understanding of bullying in school contexts and to inform school policies (Rodriguez et al., 2021).

The current study presents secondary data analysis from a large-scale qualitative study on the educational experiences of autistic children and young people in Ireland (McNally et al., 2025a; McNally et al., 2025b). In our analysis, we focus specifically on post-primary school students’ accounts of bullying in school as this was evident in the data despite it not being the focus of the wider study. This provided justification for a separate study centred on students’ reports of bullying, allowing experiences to be explored in-depth. The primary research question guiding this study was: what are the bullying experiences of autistic students in post-primary schools in Ireland? Throughout, we refer to experiences of bullying rather than bullying ‘victimisation’ as there is some evidence that using terms such as victim or victimisation can further marginalise of autistic individuals who have experienced social exclusion (Rigby, 2017).

Methods

Community Involvement Statement

The research team included two autistic researchers and three non-autistic researchers, and the study was informed at all stages by two advisory groups, which included autistic students, autistic researchers and educational specialists, academics, and parents of autistic children.

Positionality Statement

The authors are White female researchers at different career stages, including early career researchers, with disciplinary backgrounds in psychology, education, and healthcare. The research team comprised two autistic and three non-autistic authors. Collectively, the authors bring expertise in autism research, inclusive education, and student wellbeing within the Irish education and health systems. The authors' professional roles and disciplinary training informed the analysis and interpretation of autistic students' accounts of bullying, exclusion, and school support in post-primary schools in Ireland. Reflexive dialogue and collaborative analysis across autistic and non-autistic perspectives were used throughout the research process to examine assumptions and support rigor and transparency in the authentic interpretation of participants' experiences.

Participants

Eighteen autistic post-primary school students took part in the wider study of the school experiences of autistic students in Ireland (McNally et al., 2025c). Of this sample, 16 students took part directly through interview, and two students took part indirectly through their parents. Participants were asked about their school experiences and were not asked specifically about experiences of bullying. Eight of the 16 students (50%) who were interviewed directly explicitly described experiences of bullying and social exclusion in school, and one of the student's parents also explicitly named social exclusion. The experiences of these nine students form the basis of our analysis in this study. Where parents also contributed to the interview discussion on their child's experiences of bullying these contributions are included in the analysis. Seven students attended a mainstream post-primary school, and two students were learning from home at the time of interview, having previously attended a mainstream post-primary school (see Table 1 for participant characteristics).

Materials and Procedure

Sampling

Purposeful, non-probability sampling was used for qualitative interview data collection with children and their families (Creswell, 1998). A criterion of saturation was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for interviews whereby new cases (interviews) were added to the study to the point of diminishing

Table 1 Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender*	School Context	Inter-view Format	Informant(s)
Irene	13	Girl	1st year, learning from home – Previously attended main-stream	In-person	Student & father
Henry	13	Boy	1st year, main-stream	Online	Student & mother
Peter	14	Boy	2nd year, main-stream	In-person	Student & mother
Maeve	14	Girl	3rd year, main-stream	In-person	Student & mother
Jane	16	Girl	3rd year, main-stream	In-person	Student & mother
Jamie	16	Boy	4th year, main-stream	In-person	Student & mother
Sayra	17	Girl	4th year, home learning – Previously attended main-stream	Online	Student & Mother
Brian	17	Boy	5th year, main-stream	Online	Student & father
Jessica	19	Woman	6th year, main-stream	Online	Student

Information on gender was provided by parents during a pre-survey prior to interview. We did not ask if gender aligned with sex assigned at birth. One student self-identified as transgender at interview (and is listed using their stated gender identity), but we cannot assume the remaining students are cisgender, so have not specified beyond stated gender

returns when no new information was added (Elliott & Timulak, 2005). Recruitment took place outside of schools in order to minimise limitations with school-based data collection, such as increased likelihood of students' compliance to participate (Lewis et al. 2023). A recruitment campaign through national broadcast media and social media was launched across Ireland thus allowing students across Ireland to take part without restriction to one location or type of school. Full ethical approval for data collection was obtained through the corresponding author's institution.

Adapted Interviews

Participating young people were invited to share their experiences about school through semi-structured interviews. Students were asked about their school experiences generally. Interview protocols were adapted to each participant's communication needs and preferences, and students could select to be interviewed online (at home) or in-person (on the university campus). Parents were present during the interview or nearby if, and when students needed support to answer questions.

Materials and procedures are described in detail in previous studies and can be found elsewhere (McNally et al., 2025c).

Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed manually using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Analysis was primarily inductive and centred on the construction of themes driven by the primary research question. Preliminary themes were actively generated following identification of semantic and latent codes by the second author, which were subsequently reorganised and finalised using thematic mapping in discussion with the first author. Braun and Clarke (2021) discuss how sometimes analysis 'procedures' can be prioritised over reflexivity and theoretical sensitivity. In other words, true reflexivity involves 'knowing' the practice of thematic analysis and applying it systematically and sensitively to research, yet remaining adaptable to change (Chamberlain, 2000; Elliot et al., 1999). The second author prioritised reflexivity and adaptability (Chamberlain, 2000) throughout analysis: further, all themes were reviewed and agreed in discussion with the first author, which included carefully labelling themes in line with a neuro-inclusive paradigm.

Results

One major theme with three subthemes were constructed from the data, each highlighting distinct yet interconnected aspects of students' experiences (see Fig. 1 for a thematic

map). Related to the major theme of experiences of overt bullying and social exclusion, three subthemes were constructed: (1) lack of teacher and institutional support; (2) misconceptions about autism; and (3) adverse emotional and mental health impact.

Major Theme: Students' Experiences of Bullying and Social Exclusion

Reports of overt bullying and social exclusion occurred 22 times in the data. One parent, of a sixteen-year-old girl, highlighted the difficulties experienced by their child at school, noting that 'the bullying and the social isolation has been hard' (Jane's mother). Many students experienced or observed sustained social exclusion. This form of exclusion included being left out of peer groups, being stereotyped or misunderstood, and experiencing a lack of institutional support in developing meaningful friendships.

Brian (17 years old) highlighted the destructive nature of bullying in school: "Children can be vicious creatures, especially to each other which I, I mean I knew existed but was not expecting it to that degree". One student, Jane, described how a former friend would only include her when her other friends were not present in the class:

The girl that I was friends with, she's pretending that everything is OK and sitting beside me in classes when her friends are not in. And then she's just treating me like I'm nothing and making me feel like I'm nothing. [...] Because she dropped me and then she went to hang out with a new friend.

Jamie (16 years old), recounted experiences in a previous school where a group of peers were unkind and exclusionary, highlighting a lack of social support and friendship. He described the experiences of an autistic peer as he remained a bystander to exclusionary behaviour within his class, noting that the student had no friends and was not encouraged to create any friendships within school by teachers:

Every time I've looked at him, I felt bad for him – because he was just... he was sat at the back of every class, and he had no friends, he had no encouragement to go and make friends. It was just sad.

Maeve (14 years old) described how an awareness talk about autism, with the intent of bringing awareness to autism, became more exclusionary by including a neurotypical person and not an autistic person. Several students reported feelings of worthlessness, sadness, and isolation. Jane explicitly connected her social experiences to school absenteeism: "I've missed a few days of school because of it".

These experiences were echoed by parents, who expressed concern about need to be able to identify where adolescents may be masking in social interactions in school. Jamie's mother noted key components of common neurotypical

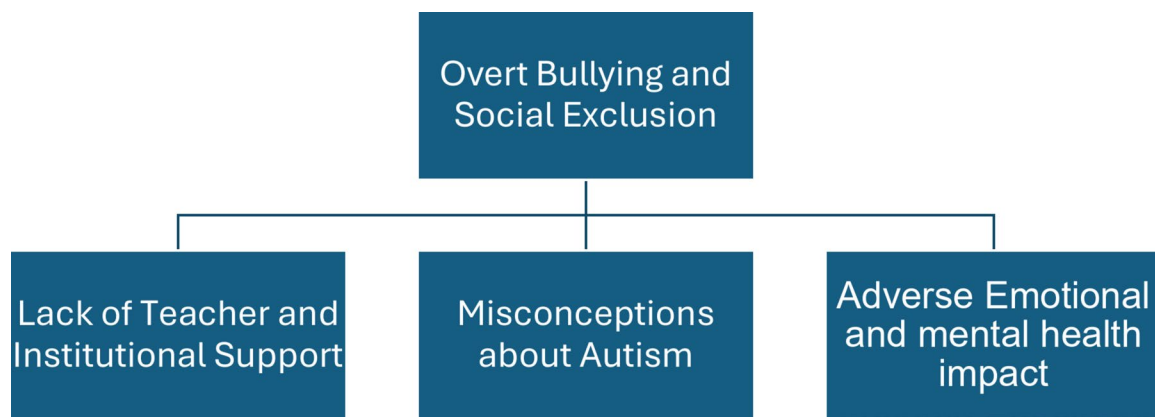


Fig. 1 Thematic Map

teenage girls' group dynamics and subtle social exclusion, especially how the nature of exclusion from social groups can feel very personal: "But the neurotypical girl teens, they love the obtuseness, and the vague... the drama. [...] I was so shocked at how unkind and exclusionary – it felt like a personal exclusion".

Subtheme 1: Lack of Teacher and Institutional Support in Response to Bullying

Students reported a lack of teacher and institutional support, including a lack of understanding where educators failed to accommodate autistic students' needs, and inadequate responses to bullying, including the dismissal or mishandling of incidents.

Some students' experiences illustrated scenarios in which they felt that bullying was mishandled due to factors such as a lack of understanding surrounding autism, lack of institutional support (i.e. supportive protective layers from the top down) or mistreatment from teachers. Henry's mother explained:

The school needs to up its game I think on the awareness side – so, rather than me or [Henry] giving out about it, if we could collectively as a group of parents advocate for that, it'd be easier for the school and easier for us. (Mother of Henry, 13 years old)

These experiences were echoed by parents, who expressed concern about teachers' lack of understanding and the passive normalization of social exclusion, as well as the need to be able to identify where adolescents may be masking in social interactions in school:

[...] I think, if, in terms of the educational system as a whole, I think there could be some supports to make sure that children who are vulnerable in that way, you know with autism, with undiagnosed autism particularly in girls who are masking so much, if some kind of support could be put in place, particularly for educators to be able to identify

what's going on. [...] You know, they either don't see it or they don't acknowledge it. And I think there just needs to be so much more awareness of the fact that this is going on, that this relational bullying is going on. And the educators need to be consciously and intentionally looking out for it. (Mother of Sayra, 17 years old)

A common finding across the data was an inadequate understanding by educators of autism and related neurodivergent characteristics. This lack of awareness often led to misinterpretation of autistic students' needs, resulting in inadequate support and, in some cases, unintentional harm. For example, one mother of a 14-year-old boy, Peter, recounted how her son was excluded from a school trip despite expressing readiness to attend, based on an assumption about his ability to handle the event: "A teacher he never had was the tour coordinator and she rang and said, "I won't let him go this time for his own wellbeing, it would be too much for him, it's a busy day'." Peter's mother recalled reassuring her son that by highlighting and challenging barriers to inclusion they would help other autistic students in the future who wish to participate in school outings: "But we got there and we were saying, 'you're just paving the way for the next first years coming in, all these battles we're doing, will help the next years coming in'."

Inadequate responses to bullying, was evident in multiple accounts, where bullying incidents involving autistic students were either mishandled or dismissed by school staff. This failure to act appropriately often resulted in students feeling unsupported and further isolated. Further, Peter and Sylvia's mothers noted that the teachers did not know or understand how to meet their needs. Peter's mother highlighted how the school's lack of understanding led to ineffective responses to her son's needs. Despite efforts from external advocacy organisations, the school's failure to integrate support mechanisms was noted: "[...] so after that then we didn't really - and I was onto [Autism Charity] who sent in additional documents on executive functioning

because the school weren't really understanding it." One student reported being silenced about their bullying experiences. For example, a sports coach within the school told a student that she was not allowed to express that she felt she had been bullied: "She was told she wasn't allowed to say she was being bullied" (Jane's mother).

Overall, parents noted a lack of understanding when it came to their child being exposed to exclusion and how sometimes schools intentionally or unintentionally minimised or exacerbated such behaviour.

Subtheme 2: The role of Misconceptions About Autism in Students' Adverse Experiences

In the second subtheme, students described how misconceptions about autism, including stereotyping and oversimplified or inaccurate portrayals of autism, were part of their experiences of bullying and social exclusion. Students and parents noted commonalities in misconceptions related to autism. Some students noted peers' limited understanding, or misconceptions, of what autism is and others noted how negative stereotypes surrounding autism were harmful and hurtful. Some of the students discussed how other people such as fellow classmates or teachers rationalized exclusion or mistreatment of autistic individuals by relying on negative stereotypes: "They justify like saying bad things about the student because they're autistic" (Maeve, 14 years old).

The word "autistic" was also reported as being used as an insult:

People, not just in my year but actually in the whole school, using the word like, you're so autistic, as a really negative term. I don't think it's ever been used, or, it has actually been used towards me a couple of times, but not in the knowledge that I am autistic. But I think the perception of what autism is, is incorrect enough to the point where it's being used as an insult. (Henry, 13 years old)

Henry's mother recounted her child's insight on how the use of the term autistic as pejorative was like other forms of discrimination such as racism:

When we were... he gave me the example when he told me, one of the kids made a joke about someone being autistic – and this child is black. And [Henry] said, that's like someone saying to you, that's really black, [NAME] – which I thought was very perceptive. (Henry's mother)

To combat negative views of autism, Jamie (16 years old) discussed how he felt he had to adapt to fit in, particularly by being nice to everyone:

I think teaching empathy is very difficult to do – because it's just going to make people laugh at you. You know, you have to be nice to these people because they're either going to end up seeing autistic people as disabled. (Jamie)

Subtheme 3: Adverse Impacts on Students' Emotional and Mental Health

The third and final subtheme highlighted the adverse impact of bullying and social exclusion on students' emotional and mental health. Within this subtheme, students and their parents reported experiences of anxiety and stress related to social pressures, and low self-esteem, stemming from repeated negative interactions. In some cases, students explained how they engaged in school avoidance, or how they wished they had moved schools altogether: "I wouldn't have picked that school... somewhere a bit more inclusive, a bit more diverse" (Maeve's mother). This was echoed by her daughter Maeve (14 years old), "This is why I need to move schools."

Experiences of social exclusion had a profound impact on students' mental well-being: "Awful. Awful. In the last school they were horrible. Like, I had a group of maybe seven people... but the rest of them were just like, what's wrong with you" (Jamie, 16 years old).

Another student Jane (16 years old), recalled the impact of the bullying on her mental health, which eventually resulted in her moving school:

[...] I've been sad and crying in the nurse's office until she [mother] comes and collects me because I don't want to be in school. And I want to have a top locker. And probably to make more friends. But I probably will because they split up the classes in TY, so I get to be with different people. [...] It's just stressful. Then if it doesn't go right, I get a pain in my tummy. And then at the end when it was OK but it was a bit bad, I started to get these episodes where I felt like I was going to faint or something. Like I was literally about to faint but I wasn't. And my anxiety was like, up the roof. I was scared to go into school. Like, I was crying and I didn't want to go into school. Like, I was crying every morning. (Jane)

Similarly, a mother of a 17-year-old girl, Sayra, linked social exclusion to her daughter's anxiety in and around school:

The most difficult parts over the past couple of years have been the social stuff, which has been really really difficult. [...] It's difficult to get across how hard that was at times and how much that contributed to her anxiety. It just made life so difficult for her, you know? (Sayra's mother)

Despite the harm of bullying, some students such as Jessica (19 years old) showed empathy with, and awareness of, the bully's struggles and why they might have engaged in bullying: "I had one guy who bullied me... But I know he has mental health issues, and he's had a very difficult life."

Discussion

In this study, bullying and social exclusion were described by students in response to open-ended questions about school life. Several students described traditional forms of

bullying, including verbal abuse and deliberate exclusion, and more covert forms of bullying, which schools routinely failed to address. In some cases, schools perpetuated the social isolation felt by autistic students through differential treatment based on misconceptions of autism, including an assumption of reduced capacity leading to further exclusion. These findings align with prior research on experiences of stigmatisation among autistic individuals (Botha et al., 2022) and suggest a normalisation of social exclusion in school contexts. These experiences urgently need to be addressed in the context of inclusive education more widely: our findings speak to the importance of school culture in ensuring autistic students are fully included as well as ensuring anti-bullying policies adequately address the needs of autistic students with regard to bullying prevention.

Our findings are notable in two ways. Firstly, prior research has explicitly focused on bullying (Carrington et al., 2017) and can fail to capture more subtle forms of social exclusion, or instances of bullying that students do not label as such despite the distress and impact being felt. Half of the autistic students in our study reported frequent and distressing experiences of bullying and social exclusion when asked about their day-to-day school experiences, which is a higher proportion than reported in some studies (e.g. Rodriguez et al., 2021; Trundle et al., 2023) but in keeping with the generally high prevalence of bullying experiences reported across the literature (Molcho et al., 2009). Secondly, few studies have adequately captured the perspectives of autistic students themselves on experiences of bullying and social exclusion (e.g. Carrington et al., 2017). Autistic students' lived experiences are essential for informing appropriate clinical, educational, and policy interventions (Zeedyk et al., 2014; Chou & Lee, 2024). We highlight next the implications of autistic students' experiences for practice and policy in school contexts.

The emergence of bullying in interviews with autistic students about their wider school experiences is in keeping with reports in the literature of a higher prevalence of bullying experienced by autistic students (Maiano et al., 2016). Autistic students' wider experiences of bullying and social exclusion were both relational and institutional and often reinforced by school practices or inaction. The students who reported bullying or social exclusion were in mainstream schools or had been attending mainstream schools before learning from home. This is in keeping with prior research on the experiences of autistic boys who were more likely to report bullying experiences in mainstream schools (Cook et al., 2016). In our study, a power imbalance between autistic students and their peers was evident. For example, autistic students reported the need to be nice to be accepted by non-autistic peers and that they were vulnerable to hurtful comments because their peers' negative views of autism. These

insights underscore that exclusion is not always overt; it is often subtly enacted through relational aggression and complex peer hierarchies, especially among neurotypical adolescents.

The psychological consequences of exclusion were stark. Autistic students and their parents described how social exclusion could extend into educational disengagement, suggesting a connection between emotional distress and academic presence. There was a broad awareness among students of the hostile social climates they navigated, often without adequate adult intervention.

Our findings also highlight the importance of teacher support and early recognition of the potential for both overt and more covert experiences of bullying, and the need for intervention and sustained support to safeguard autistic students from bullying. Proactive, school-based strategies that foster inclusive and supportive environments are likely to be crucial as a protective factor (Ochi et al., 2020). Some students' experiences illustrated various scenarios in which they felt that bullying was mishandled due to various factors such as a lack of understanding surrounding autism, lack of institutional support or mistreatment from teachers. This suggests the need for improved teacher education and institutional support to ensure a more inclusive and responsive school environment for autistic students: collaborative efforts involving parents, teachers and healthcare professionals are likely to be most effective in building robust social support networks (Junttila et al., 2024).

The reliance on stereotypes when working with students reported in this study stress the need to challenge deficit-based narratives of autism (Chapman et al., 2022) and to actively work towards a strengths-based view of autism in school contexts (McNally et al., 2025a; McNally et al., 2025b). Indeed, Cook et al. (2020) found that inclusive settings which focused on autism awareness fostered empathy among neurotypical students, contrasting with declining empathy in non-inclusive settings. Conversely, researchers have highlighted the negative outcomes for autistic students when encouraged to camouflage their differences in social communication (Bradley et al., 2021). Our findings suggest support for a multifaceted approach to bullying prevention, prioritising early intervention and responsiveness to reports of bullying and exclusion, collaborative support networks for students, and commitment to a strengths-based view of autism to mitigate and prevent the adverse effects of bullying and exclusion on autistic students in post-primary contexts.

Lastly but perhaps most significantly our findings clearly highlight the adverse impact of having experienced bullying or exclusion on the mental health and wellbeing of autistic students, and align with findings in the wider literature. For example, Ferrigno and colleagues (2022) have linked prior

bullying experiences to persistent mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, among autistic adults, emphasising the need for lifelong support. Prior research also indicates that autistic students show greater accuracy than neurotypical peers in recognising and understanding bullying: age and autism status were significant predictors of comprehension, with older autistic students showing heightened awareness, potentially due to greater exposure to bullying (Hwang et al., 2017). Autistic people have reported that society views autism as a bad trait to have and can struggle with the tension between being autistic and negative societal views (Botha et al., 2022). This aligns with the findings in our study where students interviewed gave nuanced accounts of bullying or exclusion and identified mechanisms underpinning these (e.g. misconceptions of autism, negative views of autism, and lack of institutional support).

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Our findings align with the growing research literature on the school experiences of autistic students and suggest three ways in which school policies and practices can be developed to improve the school experiences of autistic students and prevent bullying.

Firstly, school policies and practices should ensure that diversity is valued in schools. Students themselves have highlighted that an intolerance of difference is often linked to bullying. For example, at a world café on addressing bullying behaviour, students highlighted the importance of valuing difference as a strategy for preventing bullying (Heaney et al., 2025). For bullying prevention, a whole-school approach that includes the active development of caring school environments, and a downplaying of social hierarchies in favour of solidarity and equality (Försberg & Thornberg, 2016), may be especially important in supporting autistic students.

Secondly, schools should actively challenge deficit-based narratives of autism. A deficit view of autism has been linked to the stigma that autistic people, including the autistic students in our study, have highlighted as playing a key role in adverse experiences (Botha et al., 2022) such as bullying and exclusion.

Finally, including the voices of autistic students in the development of antibullying policies and wider school policies for inclusion is an important and necessary step in developing fully inclusive schools (Ainscow, 2020) and preventing the types of bullying and exclusion identified by students in our study and the wider literature. This is in keeping with findings from the wider literature highlighting the need for greater collaboration with and involvement of autistic students in research that has implications for their lives (Gormley et al., 2024; Lynam et al., 2024).

Overall, our findings highlight the importance of student voice and participation in bullying prevention and the importance of developing inclusive school cultures. Our findings further place a spotlight on social exclusion as a form of bullying that is especially relevant to the school experiences of autistic students. Indeed, national longitudinal data in Ireland indicates that students with a disability appeared to be the focus of more social kinds of bullying, including exclusion and name-calling, and that this type of bullying was linked to both poorer wellbeing and greater depression (Smyth & Darmody, 2025). Together, the findings from qualitative and quantitative studies highlight the prevention of social exclusion as a key goal in bullying prevention policies for autistic students.

Limitations

While extensive efforts were made to recruit a diverse sample of autistic students, autistic students from ethnic minorities were under-represented in our study and the experiences of these students are largely missing from the research literature (Lewis et al., 2024). Further, autistic people are more likely than neurotypical peers to identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. While our sample did include one student who identified as transgender, we did not explore how multiple social identities may have affected their experiences of bullying and exclusion. Future research should therefore seek to widen the participation, and capture the experiences, of students from diverse backgrounds and identities to ensure research captures and investigates intersectionality as it pertains to school-based bullying and exclusion of autistic students. Lastly, self-selection bias may have resulted in students volunteering to take part in our study who wished to highlight adverse school experiences, such as bullying and exclusion. However, our findings are in keeping with the wider literature indicating a high proportion of autistic students experience bullying and exclusion in mainstream contexts.

Conclusion

Autistic students' self-reports of bullying and exclusion in school in this study were consistent with broader conceptualisations of bullying and its mental health impacts (Arse-neault et al., 2010). Our findings suggest schools need to focus on creating fully inclusive environments, placing an emphasis on a safe school culture and climate for all students and reducing stigma that students recognised as associated with autism. Our findings also highlight the need to ensure that anti-bullying policies are informed by autistic students themselves and that autistic students are actively involved

in policy making that affects their school lives. Including the voices of autistic students in the development of anti-bullying policies and wider school policies for inclusion is an important and necessary first step in developing fully inclusive schools (Ainscow et al., 2006) and preventing the types of bullying and exclusion reported by students themselves. Our research also advances findings from quantitative studies which have shown links between bullying and adverse mental health outcomes, such as anxiety (Holden et al., 2020), by providing evidence of the lived experiences of bullying and exclusion by autistic students and the impact of these experiences on autistic students' school attendance and overall wellbeing. Our findings strongly suggest that developing an inclusive school culture which actively challenges deficit-based narratives or attitudes to autism may also be an effective strategy in helping to prevent social exclusion of autistic students in school contexts.

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Author contributions SM developed the concept and analysis plan for the current study. SM and MRS developed the concept for the wider study. SB conducted the thematic analysis and drafted the initial thematic findings. SM and SB discussed and revised the findings collaboratively. SM led the writing of the main manuscript with contributions from LK, AL, and SB. SM prepared figure 1 in collaboration with SB. All authors made comments on and reviewed the final manuscript.

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Data Availability Anonymised data may be made available based on reasonable request.

Declarations

Consent to Publish declaration Consent was sought from participants for anonymised data to be published.

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate In accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, ethical approval for this project was sought and gained from the corresponding author's institution. Consent to participate was sought and given by all participants.

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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