

Creative Arts-Based Pedagogy with Autistic Students:

Developing a Manifesto for Change

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Abstract

Inclusive education is essential to a fair and equitable society, yet autistic students often experience limited inclusion in mainstream secondary schools. Further, traditional pedagogies which rely on linear, text-based instruction can alienate both autistic and non-autistic learners who engage more effectively through visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic modes. In contrast, creative arts-based pedagogy offers an inclusive, flexible approach to teaching and learning which promotes engagement and understanding. However, existing research is limited by small samples, weak methodologies, corrective, pathology-focused ontologies of autism, and substantial epistemic injustice.

To address these limitations, I will report on three interlinked studies exploring how creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP) is perceived and experienced by autistic students and mainstream secondary school teachers. CABP is a pedagogical approach which uses the creative arts to support teaching and learning in classroom environments. It is a whole-class, interactive, collaborative, and multimodal approach and its focus is on the way in which teaching occurs, rather than on the specific subject matter being taught. Practical applications include the drama-based method of “hot seating,” where students adopt roles to explore perspectives and rhythmic or musical strategies for teaching foundational skills such as the alphabet.

In Study One, I carried out a convergent-integrated mixed-methods systematic review synthesising 24 studies. While findings indicated generally positive outcomes, they also revealed the persistence of corrective, pathology-focused ideologies. I report on four overarching themes: perceptions of autism, the nature of CABP, its outcomes, and the barriers and facilitators influencing implementation.

Study Two involved a qualitative questionnaire with mainstream secondary teacher participants; the aim was to explore teachers' perceptions of the benefits and risks, and barriers and facilitators associated with facilitating CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school students. Teachers described CABP as providing ‘safe spaces’ that support autistic students’ social and personal development, though their perceptions were often characterised by ableist undertones. Reported barriers were primarily structural, including time, funding, and experience.

Finally, in Study Three, I conducted semi-structured interviews with autistic students, analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Students highlighted the shortcomings of traditional pedagogies and viewed CABP as a more authentic, creative, and affirming way to learn. The importance of autistic voices in developing an authentic understanding of the autistic experience of CABP is discussed, along with infrastructural barriers to the implementation of CABP with autistic students in mainstream secondary schools.

Empirical findings suggest that both teachers and autistic students value CABP for enhancing engagement, learning, and information retention. Although autistic students identified a number of previously unidentified CABP-associated risks, their perceptions appear to consider the benefits to outweigh them. There are, however, significant barriers preventing CABP implementation with autistic students in the mainstream secondary school classroom which should be explored and overcome as a next step towards inclusive pedagogy in mainstream classrooms.

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Authors Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Chapter 2.4.1 of this thesis has been shortened, and therefore re-structured and paraphrased, but is taken from the findings of a published narrative systematic review which can be accessed via the following reference:

Doyle, K. & Kim, L. E. (2025). Creative art-based pedagogies with autistic students: A systematic review on stakeholders' perspectives on its delivery and implementation in secondary mainstream schools. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 57.

Chapter 3 of this thesis has been published as a pre-print and is currently in review at a journal. It can be accessed via the following link: https://osf.io/preprints/osf/3zrm6_v2

Chapter 4 of this thesis has been published as a pre-print and is currently in review at a journal. It can be accessed via the following link: https://osf.io/preprints/osf/uz46c_v1

1. Introduction

Although inclusive education is widely recognised as fundamental to developing a fair and equitable society (United Nations, 2019), evidence suggests that autistic students do not always experience genuine inclusion in mainstream secondary schools. The UK Government’s mission report on breaking down barriers to opportunity (Department for Education, 2023) suggests that structural inequities prevent some students from acquiring the qualifications and skills necessary to thrive in society. More specifically, the Children’s Commissioner’s Office (CCO) in England has raised concerns that autistic students attending mainstream schools face disproportionate barriers to accessing inclusive education. This concern is reflected in recent data which illustrates that, during the 2023–2024 academic year, over 45% of Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) appeals were related to inadequate educational support for autistic students (CCO, 2024). Considering this, it could be argued that there is a discrepancy between the Department for Education’s (DfE) reported commitment to address inclusion, and the lived realities of autistic students in mainstream secondary provisions. With that in mind, the DfE has identified as a research priority the need to explore how schools can more effectively facilitate equitable opportunities for all students to achieve and thrive (DfE, 2025). Therefore, it could be argued that there is a need for research which critically examines inclusive pedagogical and institutional approaches which could more meaningfully support autistic students in mainstream secondary provisions.

While education is a broad construct encompassing policy, culture, and structural provision (Ainscow, 2020), this research focuses specifically on pedagogy, or the way a teacher teaches. Traditional pedagogical practices often rely on linear, text-based modes of knowledge transmission, such as the “talk and chalk” approach (Artemeva & Fox, 2011). Such approaches may, however, alienate autistic and non-autistic learners who generally

engage more effectively through visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic modalities. In contrast, inclusive and creative pedagogical approaches, such as creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP), have been considered particularly beneficial for autistic students due to their multimodal nature; CABP, for example, honours multiple means of participation (Shepherd et al., 2014), which may be especially beneficial when working with students who communicate in both traditional and non-traditional ways (Lee et al., 2024).

Given these reported benefits, perhaps it would be valuable to explore how potentially inclusive pedagogical frameworks such as CABP might support autistic students within mainstream education. Existing evidence indicates that CABP can enhance communication, emotional expression, social interaction, and self-confidence among autistic learners, while fostering inclusion, resilience, and creative independence (Doyle & Kim, 2025). However, such findings should be interpreted with caution. Much of the current literature is characterised by small-scale, short-term studies which have omitted autistic stakeholder voices, instead focusing on pathology-focused, quantitative, observational research. This imbalance risks perpetuating ableist narratives rather than advancing neurodiversity-affirmative understandings of learning and inclusion.

These limitations highlight the need for qualitative inquiry that centres autistic perspectives and explores the perceptions of stakeholders, including autistic students themselves, on CABP within a neurodiversity-affirmative paradigm. An awareness of pre-existing research at the intersection of autism research and research exploring CABP is, therefore, essential. This will be examined in greater depth in *Section 2*, this theses' literature review, and *Section 3* which presents a systematic review of the field.

1.1. Positionality

Reflexivity is a fundamental quality of a qualitative researcher as who we are, and how we experience the world, undoubtedly influences analysis and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Therefore, this positionality statement aims to reflexively explore my personal positionality, and the impact of my experiences as an artist, an educator and a school administrator on the research I have conducted. Later, in *Section 2.2.*, my ontological and epistemological positionality will be explored in greater depth. As this body of work is the culmination of my life-long engagement with art, education and inclusion, my positionality is not detached nor objective; instead, it is interwoven with the threads of my lived experience, shaped by the pedagogies, practices, and paradigms that form its focus.

My ontological understanding of autism, and of disability more widely, cannot be separated from my earliest encounters. With close familial connections to disability, I was introduced early to a neurodiversity-affirmative ontology wherein disability was understood not as a deficit but as a natural and vital expression of human diversity. Within our family, disability was neither hidden nor pathologised; it was acknowledged, discussed, and embraced as integral to self-identity. This environment cultivated in me an early awareness of how societal structures can both enable and diminish human potential. I observed how education, healthcare, and policy systems could simultaneously support and restrict, often reflecting the values and assumptions of those with epistemic and social authority. Through witnessing these tensions, I came to understand disability as both an embodied experience and a social construct. These formative experiences instilled in me not only an awareness of the socio-political dimensions of disability but also a belief in the power of voice as a vehicle for equity, inclusion, and social change.

It was through this lens that my engagement with the performing arts evolved beyond self-expression towards advocacy and inclusion. Having attended extracurricular performing arts classes from the age of three, my professional identity as an artist flourished during my enrolment at a post-16 performing arts free school. Here, I discovered the epistemological power of art. Under the mentorship of an educator who recognised my dual passion for performance and social justice, I encountered “applied theatre”, which offered a means of working at the intersection of art and epistemology. My undergraduate degree in Drama, Applied Theatre and Education deepened my passion for art as a springboard for social change for specific communities, particularly those less privileged in modern society.

While enrolled I both worked and volunteered as a freelance applied theatre practitioner with a wide range of community groups, including young carers, primary school students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and individuals living with dementia. In this role, I saw first-hand the benefits of the arts when working with such populations. This work illustrated to me the ways in which participatory arts engagement has the power to challenge dominant disability narratives and provide environments for participants to assert agency and explore their identity. I saw the ways in which group-based creative arts engagement nurtured community and belonging, reinforcing the transformative potential of applied theatre as both a pedagogical tool and a vehicle for social inclusion. These experiences solidified my commitment to integrating arts-based approaches within my subsequent research and professional identity.

Another experience which informs my positionality was my work with autistic and neurodivergent pupils while employed as a teaching assistant across mainstream primary schools in London. Within this role, I was acutely aware of the complex interplay between policy-driven ideals of inclusion and the lived realities of educational practice for autistic and

neurodivergent students operating within rigid, formal educational structures. This experience developed my awareness of the prevailing culture of outcome-oriented, norm-referenced educational systems, which often fail to accommodate the diverse learning needs of neurodiverse populations. Critically, when I observed the same students navigating more flexible, creative spaces, such as the extracurricular drama clubs I facilitated, I reflected that the contrast in their engagement, expression, and agency was distinct.

Later, in my role as a senior administrator collaborating closely with a mainstream secondary school's senior leadership team, I developed a more nuanced understanding of the structural and organisational dimensions of pedagogy and educational infrastructure. From this perspective, I could see that inclusive and creative pedagogical approaches could not simply be implemented by educators; administrative and strategic priorities, shaped and constrained by funding, accountability structures, and policy frameworks, had an overarching influence on how, when, and to what extent such approaches could be realised in practice.

These experiences are central to my positionality. I am aware of, and confident in my understanding of the professional language, routines, and organisational norms of the mainstream school environment, yet I also take on the critical role of researcher. This duality necessitates ongoing reflexivity, transparency, and ethical integrity, ensuring that the voices of my participants remain central to this thesis, rather than simply my own. My personal and professional journey has therefore shaped a deep commitment to amplifying autistic and educator voices within inclusive education research.

Building upon this positional grounding, the next section outlines the theoretical and methodological positioning of this thesis.

1.2. Thesis Aims

This thesis was conducted within a neurodiversity affirmative paradigm, which will be described in more depth in *Section 2.2. Paradigmatic approach of the thesis*. Pre-existing studies exploring autism and creative arts-based pedagogy have been grounded in ableist perceptions of autism (Doyle & Kim, 2025) and a pathology or deficit paradigm (Rebecchi 2025), therefore this paradigmatic approach is novel.

Throughout this thesis, I explore perceptions of teachers and autistic students on CABP when it is used with autistic students in mainstream secondary school classrooms. Individual studies consolidate existing research, collate the perceptions of teachers and autistic students, and summarise next steps identified by both stakeholder groups. With that in mind, the overarching aims of the thesis are:

- To collate perceptions of teachers and autistic students in mainstream secondary schools on CABP and factors that could promote or obstruct the use of CABP with autistic young people in mainstream secondary schools.
- To use those perspectives to develop a manifesto outlining next steps, which can be used to influence policy and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The ontology of autism

An ontology of autism does not tell us what autism is; rather, it frames the questions we ask and, thus, the answers we collect. In other words, an ontology of autism exists as a framework which, consciously or subconsciously, impacts the way in which we understand knowledge about autism (Kourti, 2021). Since the formal conception of autism in 1943 (Feinstein, 2011) there has been a good deal of heterogeneity in the ontologies of autism that have been shared, perhaps due to the ever-changing, socially-constructed ontological status of autistic and allistic (i.e., non-autistic) neurotypes (Chown, 2014). With that in mind, the following section will critically explore these socially-constructed ontologies of autism. Rather than answering the question “what is autism?”, I will explore the ontological frameworks which have underpinned our understanding of autism over time.

2.1.1. *A pathology-focused ontology of autism*

Historically, research has been conducted *on* the autistic community rather than *with* them, resulting in epistemic injustice, or the poor representation of autistic voices in research (Shaw et al., 2024). Instead of hearing autistic voices when constructing knowledge about autism, technocratically powerful allistic researchers and medical professionals have assigned meaning to the term autism over time (Botha et al., 2022). As a result, allistic voices have maintained disproportionate epistemic authority in autism research, which has played a part in maintaining a pathology-focused ontology of autism (Smart, 2006). In this ontology, autistic and allistic bodies and minds are organised into typical (allistic) and atypical (autistic) groups. Within this framework, allistic individuals are perceived to present with typical, correct, or

normal neurology, and autistic individuals are perceived to present with deficits which should be fixed so that they appear to function typically (Shaw & Baker, 2024).

Over time, diagnostic criteria for autism have maintained this pathology-focused ontology of autism. The third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III; American Psychiatric Association, 1980) was the first to include autism, and categorised it as a pervasive developmental disorder (Rosen et al., 2021); the diagnostic criteria included a significant deficit in social reciprocity, which was supposedly consistent with Kanner's original description of autism (Kanner, 1943). When the DSM-III was revised in 1987 (DSM-III-R), additional diagnostic criteria were included, such as communicative impairments, restricted interests, resistance to change and repetitive movement (American Psychiatric Association, 1987). Today, diagnostic criteria for autism found in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) are aligned with the similar key characteristics: deficits in social communication and interaction, as well as restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests and activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013a).

The terminology used in the DSM-5 (and in previous editions of the DSM), particularly descriptors such as “impairment” and “deficit”, could be considered pathologising and individualistic. Such ontologies of autism suggest that the difficulties experienced by autistic individuals come from within the autistic individual themselves, thereby deflecting institutional responsibility and accountability for ensuring that social, educational, and physical environments are appropriately adapted to meet autistic needs (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2011). This reflects the underlying pathologising and individualised assumptions of the medical model of disability, in which disability is framed as a problem

inherent to the individual rather than a consequence of environmental or societal barriers (Haegele & Hodge, 2016).

Further, there has been little-to-no involvement of autistic individuals themselves in the development of knowledge about autism (Botha et al., 2022), including the DSM criteria. Haegele and Hodge (2016) note that, through their competence to define, treat and cure illnesses, injuries and body parts, medical professionals and scientists continue to exist as societies' cognitive epistemic authority. This role has allowed medical professionals and scientists to lead discourse, thus the conceptualisation of disability as simply a product of one's biology (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Further, direct participation of autistic individuals in the formulation of the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for autism was limited. The group tasked with developing the autism diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5 was made up of psychiatrists, psychologists and other health professionals with no documented inclusion of autistic self-advocates in formal decision-making roles (American Psychiatric Association, 2013b; Milton, 2014). While the American Psychiatric Association (APA) gave praise to the fact that advisors with specific and well-recognised expertise in a particular field, and the public, were consulted (American Psychiatric Association, 2013b), Sisti and Johnson (2015) argue that the exclusion of multiple stakeholder groups (including those with diagnoses) resulted in a less inclusive consultation than APA would have one believe.

Autistic-led organisations, including the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) and the Autism Women's Network, critiqued the process of developing autism diagnostic criteria relying on a pathology-focused ontology of autism, and for failing to engage with neurodiversity-informed perspectives (ASAN, 2012a, 2012b). Although their advocacy efforts drew attention to the sociopolitical consequences of excluding the voices of autistic individuals in the development of autism diagnostic criteria, their overall influence was

limited by the absence of formal autistic representation within the DSM-5 task force (Kapp, 2019). This is a form of epistemic injustice wherein autistic individuals' epistemic authority is diminished compared to that of allistic professionals (Shaw et al., 2024). By contrast, Stein and Phillips (2013) have reflected on the importance of their involvement of patients diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) in the development of OCD diagnostic criteria for the DSM-5, noting that understanding individual experiences and differences was crucial. This perhaps reiterates the importance of addressing the existing epistemic injustice which has resulted in the maintenance of an allistic, pathology-focused ontology of autism.

In summary, persistent epistemic injustice has resulted in the dominance of allistic, pathology-focused ontologies of autism. This ontological framework considers autism to be a deficit located within the individual, consistent with the medical model of disability. Diagnostic criteria across the editions of the DSM, have maintained this ontology and autistic individuals have been largely excluded from the development of knowledge about autism, including these diagnostic criteria. This exclusion has maintained allistic epistemic authority in autism discourse.

2.1.2. Towards a neurodiversity affirmative ontology of autism

The concept of neurodiversity challenges the dominance of allistic, pathology-focused ontologies of autism; therefore, instead of the medical model of disability, a neurodiversity affirmative ontology of autism is better aligned with the social model (Oliver, 2013). The social model of disability is diametrically opposed to the medical model (Goldiner, 2022), and has been described as its “political and ideological antithesis” (Inckle, 2019). Instead of individual impairment, the social model of disability is concerned with the barriers which prevent disabled individuals from living their lives, such as segregated education, institutional

prejudice and inaccessible public places (Oliver, 1996). With that in mind, while autism is considered by those aligned with a neurodiversity affirmative ontology of autism to be a biological way of being, *disability* is understood to be experienced by autistic individuals due to “inaccessible social and political infrastructures” (Kapp et al., 2013, p. 5).

Autistic individuals reportedly prefer this neurodiversity affirmative ontological framing of autism (Bottema–Beutel et al., 2024) to the dominant pathology-focused ontology. It is important to note, however, that the perceptions of non- or minimally-verbal autistic individuals are sparsely heard in the development of knowledge about autism (Nešić, 2023), so this preference may not be representative of the entire community. Within a neurodiversity affirmative framework, divergence across human neurology is considered to be normal and valuable; there are no neurological hierarchies, rather all minds are considered to simply be different (Dmyterko, 2025). Further, rather than typical functioning, neurodiversity affirmative researchers, advocates and practitioners focus on autistic individuals’ subjective wellbeing, and oppose corrective ideological (Robinson & Crane, 2025) interventions which focus on the elimination of arguably harmless, often regulatory behaviours, such as Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA; Chamak et al., 2008). As a result, within this neurodiversity affirmative framework, autistic individuals are considered to be proud of their identity as autistic individuals, and to oppose the search for a cure (Kapp et al., 2013).

Criticisms of a neurodiversity-affirmative ontology of autism do exist. Critics argue that such a framework risks downplaying the difficulties experienced by some autistic individuals, particularly those with higher support needs (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022). For example, a group of “parents of autistic children, parent-led organisations, autism research[ers] and autistic individuals” (p. 42) contends that a neurodiversity-affirmative view offers a sanitised account of autism, one that diverts resources and attention away from those

requiring greater support (Evans, 2022). Similarly, critics caution that a focus on autism as a natural and valuable form of neurological divergence (Dmyterko, 2025), coupled with reduced emphasis on medical and social interventions (Chamak et al., 2008), may inadvertently exacerbate access barriers for autistic individuals with higher support needs. In this sense, greater societal acceptance does not automatically resolve the very real challenges such individuals encounter (Fox, 2023). These concerns gain further weight when considering the persistent lack of epistemic authority afforded to non- or minimally-verbal autistic individuals in shaping autism knowledge (Nešić, 2023).

However, it could be argued that a neurodiversity affirmative focus on subjective wellbeing (Chamak et al., 2008), rather than corrective ideological interventions, directly addresses these criticisms. Rodogno, Krause-Jensen and Ashcroft (2016) illustrate this point in relation to self-stimulatory behaviours (Rodogno et al., 2016). They argue that within a pathology-focused ontology of autism, self-stimulatory behaviours may be deemed “contextually inappropriate” (p. 402) and subject to corrective ideological interventions, on the grounds that they are disruptive and may contribute to further “deficits” (p. 402) in socio-communicative development. They further point out that in contrast, a neurodiversity-affirmative ontology rejects the assumption that training away these behaviours benefits autistic individuals. Instead, it highlights that such interventions may erode wellbeing over time and offer little long-term value (Rodogno et al., 2016). That is not to say that a neurodiversity affirmative ontology of autism suggests that this or other interventions should not be partaken in by autistic individuals, but that the focus should be on interventions which prioritise the subjective wellbeing of autistic individuals, rather than benchmarking them against non-autistic norms (Robinson & Crane, 2025).

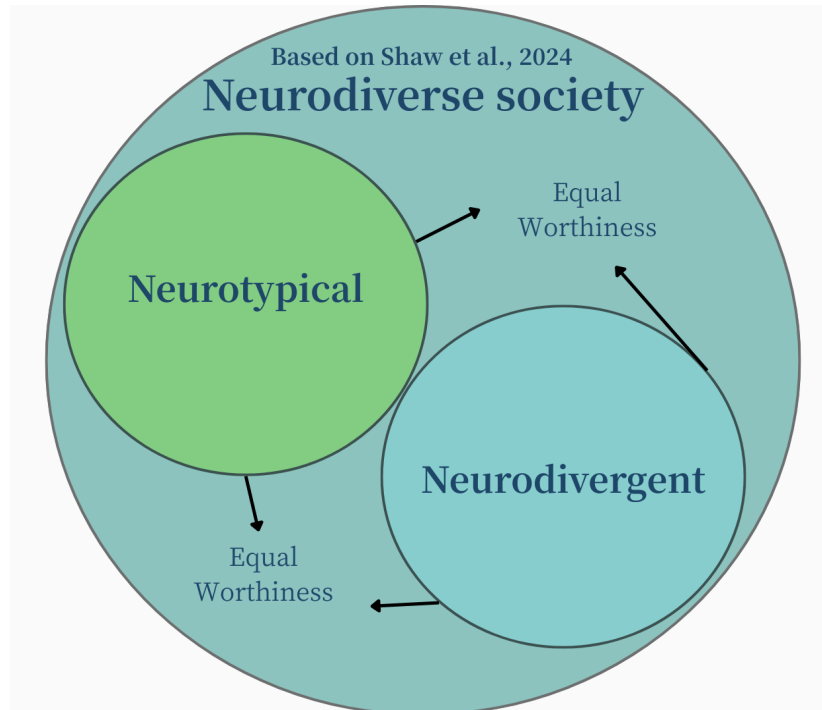
In summary, despite its criticisms, a neurodiversity affirmative ontology of autism is reportedly the preferred ontological framework for autistic individuals themselves, when compared to the dominant pathology-focused ontology of autism. Further, advocates aligned with this neurodiversity affirmative ontology of autism suggest that the insider experiences of autistic individuals qualifies them to hold epistemic authority in the creation of knowledge about autism (Baker, 2011; Savarese et al., 2010). With that in mind, one aim of this thesis was to include the voices of autistic individuals in the methodology at every stage, to counter the epistemic injustice they have experienced (Shaw et al., 2024), particularly in studies at the intersection of research into autism and creative arts-based pedagogy. The following section will explore the ways in which a neurodiversity paradigm was applied throughout the research process to ensure that autistic voices were central at every stage.

2.2. Paradigmatic approach of the thesis

To conduct research is to acquire knowledge systematically and in an organised manner; the path to acquiring knowledge is variable according to a wide range of factors, including the researcher's philosophical beliefs (Khaldi, 2017). Such belief systems form the research paradigm, which consists of three interconnected core components: ontology, epistemology, methodology (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Research paradigms are powerful (Sławecki, 2018) and valuable to the research process; they guide researchers' understanding of knowledge and truth, and their understanding of the world (Kamal, 2019) within which it exists. The following paragraphs will explore the ways in which my beliefs are aligned with that of a neurodiversity paradigm, and the impact that these beliefs had on my ontological, epistemological and methodological approach.

Figure 2.1

Neurodiversity Paradigm (Shaw et al. 2024)



2.2.1. A neurodiversity paradigm

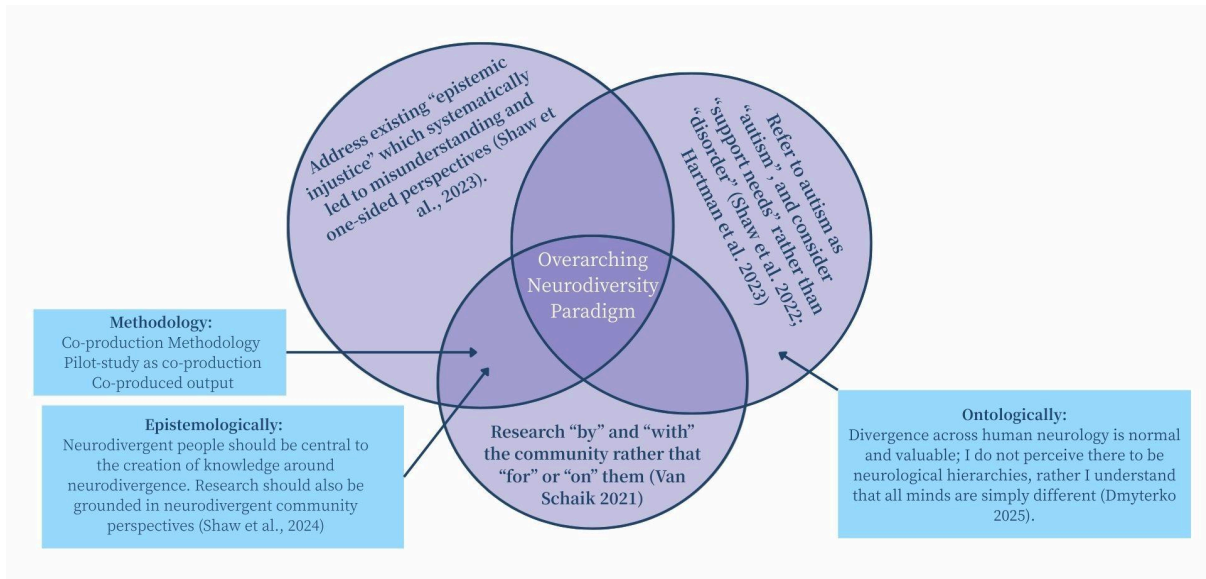
In 2024, Shaw et al., published a *When I Say* report, formally defining a neurodiversity paradigm. As illustrated by Figure 2.1, Shaw et al. define a neurodiversity paradigm as an overarching understanding that we live in neurodiverse societies which are made up of neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals. Further, importantly, researchers who are aligned with this paradigmatic approach perceive neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals to be equally as worthy as one another (Shaw et al., 2024).

Aligning my ontological, epistemological and methodological approach with a neurodiversity paradigm was a key priority in every stage of my research. Further, as pre-existing research at the intersection of autism and creative arts-based educational practices such as creative arts-based pedagogy has been grounded in ableist perceptions of autism

(Doyle et al., 2025) and a pathology or deficit paradigm (as defined by Rebecchi, 2025), this approach, in this context, is particularly novel.

Figure 2.2

Applying a neurodiversity paradigm



2.2.2. Applying a neurodiversity paradigm

I demonstrate my alignment with a neurodiversity paradigm through my approach to ontology, epistemology and methodology (as illustrated by Figure 2.2). However, it is important to note that my understanding of a neurodiversity affirmative paradigmatic approach continues to evolve over time. Developments in individual and collective understandings of neurodiversity will continue to move and shape the way in which a neurodiversity paradigm is understood and applied in research (Pellicano & Den Houting, 2022), therefore, the approach outlined here is likely not universally and perpetually applicable.

2.2.2.1. *Ontology*

Ontology concerns the search to define the nature of one's reality (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988), it is the philosophy of reality (Krauss, 2005), or the study of what exists, what is reality, what is real, and in Crotty's simplest form, "what is" (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). As well as defining the fundamental assumptions underlying one's perceptions of reality, ontology delves into the intrinsic nature or essence of the social phenomena under investigation (Scotland, 2012) from the researcher's perspective (Scott & Morrison, 2005). Researchers must position themselves ontologically (Scotland, 2012) to aid personal comprehension, and dissemination to the reader, of their belief systems and perspectives regarding the nature of reality (Khatri, 2020; Scott & Morrison, 2005). In exploring their ontological position, researchers should ask: "what is the nature of reality?" (Khatri, 2020).

This thesis is aligned with a neurodiversity affirmative ontology of autism. As discussed above, this means that I align myself with the understanding that divergence across human neurology is normal and valuable; I do not perceive there to be neurological hierarchies, rather I understand that all minds are simply different (Dmyterko, 2025). Further, I am more interested in autistic individuals' subjective wellbeing, as opposed to adapting their behaviours through corrective ideological (Robinson & Crane, 2025) interventions. The main way in which my alignment with a neurodiversity affirmative ontology of autism will be evidenced throughout this thesis will be through my choice of language.

Within a neurodiversity paradigm, language use is particularly important (Hartman et al., 2023). I have made considerations concerning *disordering* language use in this thesis, therefore rather than referring to autism as a "disorder", and discussing "symptomatology", or "severity" (Shaw et al., 2022), I simply refer to autism as "autism", and consider individuals'

“support needs” (Hartman et al., 2023). This is in-line with my aforementioned belief that there are not neurological hierarchies, just differences.

Additionally, identity-first language is recommended (Dwyer, 2022a) by many autistic individuals in England (Shaw et al., 2022). For example, rather than referring to a “person with autism” (person-first language), I instead refer to an “autistic person” (identity-first language). I will use identity first language throughout this thesis in-line with the preferences of the autistic community (Shaw et al., 2022); this supports my belief that autistic voices should be at the centre of research about autism, as their insider experiences qualifies them to hold epistemic authority in the creation of knowledge about autism (Baker, 2011; Savarese et al., 2010). As previously discussed, the voices of non- and minimally-verbal autistic individuals are often absent in research about them, therefore these preferences do not necessarily represent their views (Nešić, 2023). However, as this thesis focuses on the perceptions of autistic students in mainstream secondary school contexts, the perceptions referenced here are perhaps more reliable.

2.2.2.2. Epistemology

While ontology is concerned with reality, epistemology is concerned by how reality will be known by the researcher; it addresses how one produces valid knowledge (Hiller, 2016). It is a theory of knowledge (Bryman, 2016), which is concerned with the nature of knowledge and its construction (Tisdell et al., 2025). A researcher's epistemological position underpins their perceptions of the nature of knowledge and knowledge creation (Yin, 2015). In exploring their epistemological position, researchers should ask: “what is knowledge?” and “how do we know something?” (Kobayashi, 2019).

This thesis is aligned with a neurodiversity affirmative epistemology. Shaw et al. (2024) define a neurodiversity affirmative epistemology succinctly. In summary: (1) autistic individuals, and their perceptions, are at the centre of knowledge creation about autism; and (2) social justice is a key focus. Concerning the former, research undertaken “by” and “with” the autistic community, rather than “for” or “on” them (van Schaik, 2021) is understood to be a key priority in neurodiversity affirmative epistemological approach. With that in mind, every effort was made to ensure that autistic individuals were central to the research process. The co-production of this thesis will be discussed in greater depth in *2.2.2.3 Methodology*.

Concerning social justice, one of the aims of this project was to combat the existing epistemic injustice at the intersection of research exploring autism and creative arts based pedagogy by increasing the epistemic authority of autistic individuals in the field. I have discussed the ways in which allistic voices have maintained disproportionate epistemic authority in autism research, which has played a part in maintaining an allistic, often pathology-focused, ontology of autism (Smart, 2006). This problem appears to be particularly apparent in research exploring autism and creative arts-based pedagogy. For example, research exploring the benefits of creative arts-based pedagogy has outlined, amongst other things, improved social skills (Kehl, 2021; Movahedi et al., 2013), emotional expression (Sampurno & Zaini, 2018), and decreases in externalised problem behaviours (Barash, 2013) during and following CABP participation. However, these findings appear to be aligned with a corrective ideological framing of autism, wherein autistic skills are benchmarked against non-autistic standards (Robinson & Crane, 2025); this alignment is not dissimilar to the aforementioned alignment of allistic autism researchers who have maintained epistemic authority in the field.

Similarly, it would appear that very few autistic voices have been heard in the existing research. Rather, research appears to have been conducted *on* not *with* autistic participants. With that in mind, my aim to ensure that autistic voices are central at every stage of the research process is, perhaps, a valuable first step in addressing social justice. The following section will outline the ways in which this inclusion of autistic voices was practically applied during the methodological process.

2.2.2.3. Methodology

The study of methodology examines the practices and perceptions of researchers who use a wide range of data collection methods (Bryman, 2008). In other words, “methodology is defined as the research strategy that outlines the way one goes about undertaking a research project” (Howell, 2013, p. ix). Paradigms of enquiry or philosophical positioning, in this case my neurodiversity affirmative ontological and epistemological approach, are intrinsic to my methodological approach (Howell, 2013). As aforementioned, research undertaken “by” and “with” the autistic community, rather than “for” or “on” them (van Schaik, 2021) is a key priority in neurodiversity affirmative research. Therefore, I have taken a number of methodological steps, including co-production, to increase community involvement in this research.

Co-production refers to a collaborative process through which researchers, communities, and other stakeholders collectively define problems and generate knowledge and solutions; although the term is contested and at times used rhetorically, its substantive practice is grounded in principles of radical power sharing, egalitarianism, and a commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion (Niner & Portman, 2021). In a co-production methodological approach, all parties are positioned as both knowledge users and equal

knowledge creators, and co-producers' diverse perceptions are consolidated to shape our understanding of the subject matter (Aabe et al., 2019). Therefore, ethical co-production emphasises improving access to ensure the full participation of all stakeholders (Powell, 2025). This inclusive practice is particularly important in autism research, where advocates highlight a longstanding disconnect between autistic individuals and researchers (Keating, 2021). While autistic insights have significantly informed the field, epistemic authority has too often remained with allistic researchers and institutions, reflecting persistent power imbalances (Powell, 2025).

Considering the ladder of co-production offers one way of conceptualising and addressing these power imbalances. This model positions community involvement along a continuum of seven stages: (1) coercion; (2) educating; (3) informing; (4) consultation; (5) engagement; (6) co-design; and (7) co-production. As involvement progresses up the ladder, decision-making power increasingly shifts towards shared or community-based control. The top level, co-production, represents an equal partnership between researchers and community members, who collaborate from project design through to delivery and share strategic decision-making responsibility (thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk). By contrast, co-design refers to the involvement of community members in shaping the research design, without necessarily participating in its delivery (thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk).

Co-production has gained increasing prominence in recent years due to its potential to enhance the quality, relevance, and impact of research and its outputs (Redman et al., 2021). The growing emphasis placed on co-production by funders and institutions reflects a broader shift towards neurodiversity-affirmative autism research, in which autistic individuals are more actively involved in the research process and increasingly recognised as central to ensuring rigour, relevance, and trust (Amann & Sleight, 2021). In this thesis, I applied a co-production methodology in three specific ways: (1) employing a paid autistic co-producer

within the research team; (2) enabling autistic participants to shape the data collection process for future participants by providing feedback on their experiences; and (3) co-designing an educational manifesto as the primary research output.

Concerning the former, a paid autistic co-producer was recruited as a collaborator at the onset of this research. We worked in partnership across all stages of the research process for each of the three empirical studies included in this thesis. Specifically, we met via Zoom twice during the design phase of each study to jointly develop and refine the research design, methods, and materials. In the first meetings, I shared my preliminary ideas for data collection, and the co-producer presented their own ideas and critiques. For example, for the autistic student interview study, they recommended making it explicit to participants that they would receive interview questions in advance, as this could make participation more appealing:

It may be appropriate to provide the participants with an overview of what will be asked in the interview beforehand. [...] I feel it saves time and helps with the follow up questions. [...] I do feel it can definitely ease anxiety around an interview and ensure they have answers as they may say no to things or not know what to say but that could be just from failing to remember.

In our second meetings, we co-produced the study materials and methods, jointly agreeing on the final versions used for data collection. The co-producer reviewed and approved all materials prior to their use. They also identified and corrected several typographical errors, including the accidental use of “person with autism” on one information sheet instead of “autistic person,” which did not align with the paradigmatic approach of the studies that we had discussed in our first meeting.

This partnership was collaborative and decision-making, not merely consultative. This is one example of many in which the collaboration between the co-producer and I improved the overall quality of the studies presented in this thesis. The co-producer's insights ensured that study materials were not only accurate but also aligned with autistic participants' preferences and needs. The co-producer's contributions improved the accessibility and clarity of the research design. Further, as previously discussed, this collaboration actively challenged the existing epistemic injustice in the field. The input of the autistic co-producer shaped decisions that might otherwise have been made without autistic perspectives, ensuring that the research was grounded in lived experience rather than allistic assumptions.

2.2.3. Paradigmatic approach in summary

To summarise, this thesis is grounded in a neurodiversity paradigm, which recognises neurological differences as natural and valuable, rejects hierarchical or deficit-based framings of autism, and positions autistic voices as central to knowledge creation (Dmyterko, 2025; Shaw et al., 2024). Aligned ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically with this paradigmatic approach, the research is centred around autistic perceptions and seeks to address epistemic injustices that have historically privileged allistic epistemic authority in autism research. Methodologically, the study employs co-production, an inclusive, social-justice oriented process rooted in radical power sharing, equity, and accessibility (Niner & Portman, 2021; Powell, 2025). This was operationalised through the employment of a paid autistic co-producer, participant-led adaptation of data collection methods, and the co-design of an educational manifesto, thereby enhancing the rigour, relevance, and impact of the research while modelling neurodiversity-affirmative practice.

2.3. Autism and inclusive pedagogy

2.3.1. What is pedagogy?

The meaning of pedagogy, and its cultural status, have shifted significantly (Murphy, 2003) since its conception in the early 20th century. When first recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1571, pedagogy was concerned with the intrinsic relationship between student, teacher, environment, and activity (Shah, 2021). However, contemporary dictionary definitions often reduce pedagogy to “the art, science or profession of teaching” (Merriam-Webster, 2025) or “the study of the methods and activities of teaching” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). Such reductions risk obscuring the complexity of pedagogy as both concept and practice. For example, scholars emphasise that pedagogy extends beyond didactics to encompass instructional techniques, strategies that enable learning, and the interactive processes between teachers and learners (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). It has further been described as a live, situated, and unpredictable process, unique to each classroom and resistant to codification; in this sense, pedagogy “remains an adventure” (Tochon & Munby, 1993, p. 207).

So, pedagogy can be defined as the art, science, and practice of teaching, encompassing techniques and strategies that enable learning while also engaging with the broader social, cultural, and political values that shape educational aims (Hall, 1905; Lawson, 2013; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). It is dynamic and context-dependent, integrating theory and practice in ways that are necessarily situated, interactive, and at times unpredictable (Alexander, 2009; Murphy, 2003; Tochon & Munby, 1993).

2.3.2. What is inclusive pedagogy?

Inclusive pedagogy is a pedagogical approach that responds to learner diversity without marginalising any one student (Florian & Spratt, 2013). Its theoretical foundations can be traced to socio-cultural perspectives on learning, particularly the work of Vygotsky (1978) on inclusive education. Vygotsky argued that learning is mediated socially, culturally and experientially, and that true conceptual development occurs through teacher/student interaction as well as direct instruction (Vygotsky, 1987). In the context of special education, Vygotsky was aligned with the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013). He differentiated primary disabilities (coined as biological impairments) from secondary disabilities, which only arose due to negative social responses; for this reason, Vygotsky highlighted the importance of social *and* instructional environments in shaping inclusive education (Stetsenko & Arieviditch, 1997; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987).

The 1994 Salamanca Statement, issued at the World Conference on Special Needs Education, marked a global commitment to inclusive education (Unesco, 1994). The statement challenged prevailing discriminatory beliefs that neurodivergent children or children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) should not be educated in a mainstream context, instead focusing on the development of cost-effective, socially cohesive and equitable, inclusive, mainstream schooling (UNESCO, 1994). However, across the 20th century, educational practice was shaped by what Florian (2015) terms “bell-curve thinking”.

Bell curve thinking can be defined as the understanding that students’ abilities are fixed, and normally distributed along a bell-shaped curve (Florian, 2015). Here, students are classified into high, average, or low ability groups; most learners are expected to fall near the mean, whilst a minority group fall in the higher or lower categories (Terzi, 2005).

Categorisation in this way can reinforce social and educational inequalities, as minority

students, such as neurodivergent students, are disproportionately represented in the lower tiers of ability grouping (Harry & Anderson, 1994), thus limiting expectations (Boaler et al., 2000; Dweck, 2013) and their future opportunities (Hart et al., 2014). No research was found to explore whether this disproportionate representation was also evident in the higher tier.

Inclusive pedagogy developed as a critique of the bell-curve thinking approach (Florian, 2014). Central to an inclusive pedagogical approach is the understanding that all children's capacity to learn can be developed, depending on the pedagogical and structural choices teachers make (Hart et al., 2014). Rather than assuming that some learners require separate pedagogical approaches, inclusive pedagogy extends what is ordinarily available in classrooms so that all students have equal opportunities for meaningful participation (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Crucially, this means designing learning environments that accommodate diversity (Goodley, 2024; Oliver, 1990). Based on this perception, a learner's capacity is not determined solely by innate ability but it is shaped by social contexts, interactions, and the opportunities created by teachers (Alexander, 2001; Claxton, 2013). Inclusive pedagogy is not, then, about simply assimilating neurodivergent learners into existing educational systems, as placement alone (whether mainstream or segregated) is insufficient, but about transforming those systems for a neurodiverse student population (Slee, 2014).

In summary, inclusive pedagogy requires a fundamental shift from teaching for "most and some" to teaching for "everybody" (Spratt & Florian, 2015). By developing their pedagogical repertoire, teachers have the opportunity to create classrooms where neurodivergence is not a barrier to learning, and is instead considered ordinary and valuable (Griffiths, 1998). Inclusive pedagogy, then, is not simply a method of individualising provision for some; it represents a broader reorientation of pedagogy (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012), it emphasises participation for all, and requires teachers to design rich,

accessible learning opportunities for their neurodiverse student population (Slee, 2014). However, designing such learning experiences is complex work that demands both time and sustained professional support. Teachers must navigate diverse learner needs, curriculum expectations, and systemic constraints while striving to maintain high levels of engagement and accessibility (Florian & Beaton, 2018; Norwich, 2013). Therefore, schools and policymakers must recognise that inclusive pedagogy flourishes when educators are provided with collaborative structures, ongoing professional learning, and the necessary resources to innovate in their practice (Ainscow, 2020; Hattie, 2012).

Some examples of inclusive pedagogical approaches will be briefly outlined in the following paragraphs, to illustrate the ways in which inclusive pedagogy can be applied in practice.

2.3.2.1 Scaffolding within the zones of proximal development

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance (Vygotsky, 1978) and scaffolding involves providing tailored support, through prompts, modeling, or questioning, to help learners engage with challenging tasks (Wood et al., 1976). So, scaffolding within the ZPD describes the individualised levels of support teachers provide their students, based on their ZPD in any given activity; over time, as learners gain competence, any scaffolds will be gradually withdrawn, promoting more independent working (Hart et al., 2014). This approach allows teachers to tailor activities to the diverse needs of their students, including their autistic students, ensuring that all students have equitable access to cognitively demanding tasks (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

2.3.2.2 Universal design for learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework aimed at creating inclusive learning environments by providing students with multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression (CAST, 2024). Teachers practicing UDL acknowledge the diversity amongst their students, and proactively design lessons which accommodate their students' different abilities, learning styles, and interests (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). For example, learning materials could be presented visually (e.g., diagrams or charts), verbally (e.g., audio recordings or narrated lectures), or kinaesthetically (e.g., through interactive simulations; CAST, 2024), depending on the learner's preference. Further, students might demonstrate their understanding of the topic through, for example, writing, speaking, or digital media (Vanderbilt University, 2025); UDL does not rely solely on exam-style questions and answers (CAST, 2024). UDL moves away from reactive differentiation of activities towards more holistic, systemic inclusivity (Meyer & Rose, 2002). Research illustrates that UDL benefits all learners, including autistic students. It also complements other inclusive pedagogical approaches, such as scaffolding within the zones of proximal development, by embedding flexibility and accessibility into the design of instruction rather than relying solely on ad hoc adjustments (CAST, 2024).

2.3.2.3. Creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP)

Creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP) is a pedagogical approach which uses the creative arts to support teaching and learning in classroom environments (Burke, 2021; Ward, 2013). Rooted in social constructivism, CABP is a whole-class, interactive, collaborative, and multimodal approach (Crane & Baggerly, 2013; Eisner, 2002) and its focus is on the way in which teaching occurs, rather than on the specific subject matter being taught (Lawson, 2013).

Within CABP, learners are invited to engage in embodied and participatory forms of knowledge construction (Abedin, 2011; Burke, 2021), drawing on art forms such as drama, dance, music, visual art, and creative language. Practical applications include the drama-based method of “hot seating,” where students adopt roles to explore perspectives (Andrews et al., 2021), and rhythmic or musical strategies for teaching foundational skills such as the alphabet (Kumar et al., 2022).

Creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP) has increasingly been identified as a promising avenue for advancing inclusive practice within mainstream secondary education, particularly in relation to enhancing the learning experiences of autistic students. Emerging research presents an overwhelmingly positive account of its potential benefits, while also reporting minimal associated risks (Doyle & Kim, 2025). Given this strong evidential base, alongside additional pedagogical and theoretical considerations that will be outlined below, this research project positions CABP as a central focus in exploring inclusive approaches to teaching and learning.

2.4. Why CABP?

When society and environmental factors are considered to be the cause of challenges which autistic students face in accessing inclusive education, as explained by the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013), creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP) could be considered a useful, inclusive pedagogical approach for alleviating environmental barriers and supporting autistic students to achieve and thrive (Department for Education, 2025) in mainstream provision. Traditional pedagogical approaches generally rely on linear, text-based methods of knowledge transmission (e.g., the “talk and chalk” method; Artemeva & Fox, 2011), which could marginalise learners who respond better to visual, auditory or kinaesthetic stimuli. By

contrast, CABP honors multiple ways of knowing, communicating, and participating; this makes CABP particularly powerful as an inclusive pedagogical tool, as it is capable of engaging learners across communication preferences, learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts (Garrett & MacGill, 2021; Musneckienè, 2020).

2.4.1. Autism and CABP

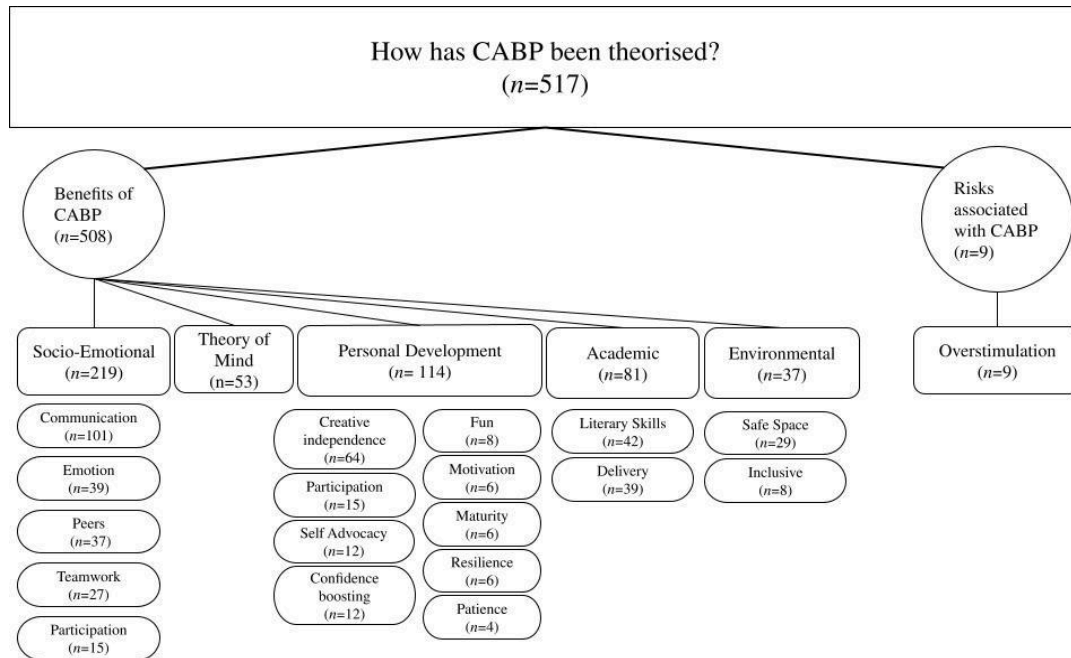
In 2023, I conducted a narrative systematic review (not included as a study in this thesis) to synthesise qualitative evidence on stakeholder perceptions of CABP implementation with autistic students in mainstream secondary schools. The review also examined how CABP has been theorised and identified gaps in existing research. Specifically, it addressed three questions: (1) How has CABP been theorised in relation to autism and secondary education? (2) What enabling and disabling factors influence its implementation from the perspective of key educational stakeholders? (3) What research gaps remain? (Doyle & Kim, 2025).

Data were extracted from the results sections of five studies (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019; Drapete, 2017; Kehl, 2021; Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021; Wiltshire, 2021) following Thomas and Harden's (2008) approach. The data were analysed inductively, generating codes directly from the raw material without a predefined framework (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The following section summarises findings relevant to the first research question: How has CABP been theorised?

CABP, when used with autistic mainstream secondary school students, was perceived with greater positivity than negativity. As depicted in Figure 2.3, developments in socio-emotional functioning were the most commonly perceived benefit of CABP, followed by personal development, academic achievement and environmental benefits. In contrast, overstimulation was the only identified risk associated with CABP at the onset of this project. Each associated benefit and risk will be discussed in turn below.

Figure 2.3

Benefits and risks associated with CABP when used with autistic mainstream secondary school students



2.4.2.1. Stakeholders’ perceived benefits of CABP

2.4.2.1.1 Socio-emotional benefits of CABP

The most common socio-emotional benefit associated with using CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school students was communication development. For example, Drapete (2017) reported that independent communication was the foremost developed skill in a single student study wherein art activities were facilitated in a classroom across four weeks. The reason for the autistic students’ communicative development was hypothesised to be the use of art as an elicitation tool, which reportedly assisted the autistic individuals’ in communicating their world, and their thoughts, with others (Drapete, 2017). The development of communicative skills in this way was perceived to support autistic students to better engage in conversations around “abstract concepts [...], such as equality, culture, gender roles, and identity” (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019, p. 174), which in turn, saw “the length and

complexity of speech increase” (Drapete, 2017, p. 42).

Emotional development was also a reported benefit of CABP when used with autistic mainstream secondary school students. For example, through writing biopoems about famous or literary individuals, autistic students were given the opportunity to explore the emotions of others, which in-turn reportedly supported their recognition and expression of their own emotions (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019). Similarly, through observations and discussions concerning the emotional state of characters, classroom-based theatre arts activities were seen to develop autistic students’ emotional recognition (Kehl, 2021).

Kehl (2021) also found the theatre-arts classroom to be an inclusive space which allowed students, who may be otherwise isolated, to develop peer relationships; “the relationships that they build with the other students [...] make all the difference” (p. 89). Others noted hearing greater conversations and more laughter from the autistic individuals during theatre arts participation, perhaps resulting in more natural reciprocal behaviour from their peers. More, and more varied, opportunities for peer communication were hypothesised to explain this improved social interaction, and thus, improved social functioning (Kehl, 2021). Similarly, one participant in Mendez-Martinez and Fernandez-Rio (2021) perceived that student relationships were formed through doing silly things that make you happy; the drama classroom was perceived by others to facilitate this: “kids com[e] in with no friends and leav[e] with 50 best friends because they spend so much time together collaborating and making connections with each other” (Kehl, 2021, p. 80).

CABP was also perceived to develop autistic students’ willingness to participate in class-based activities, either individually or as part of a team. For example, Wiltshire (2021) noted that one participant's work ethic and desire to complete her art-based project “provided her a creative efficiency that made her projects substantial in their detail and quality” (p. 114). Similarly, a participant of Mendez-Martinez and Fernandez-Rio (2021) found an autistic

individual to be “integrated and contributing, providing the group with positive things with his ideas and his way of carrying the activities” (p. 493). Finally, the variety of student roles necessitated by theatre arts developed a sense of teamwork as the students, the cast, had to rely on themselves and each other (Kehl, 2021). Another participant described a developed feeling of ensemble through participation in theatre arts (Kehl, 2021).

2.4.2.1.2. Theory of mind (ToM) developments through CABP

Theory of mind (ToM) has long been attributed to an individual’s social and communicative strengths and weaknesses (Bamicha & Drigas, 2022). Individuals presenting with strengths in ToM have been shown to acknowledge, anticipate, and interpret behaviours, of self and others, and present suitable and successful social behaviours in response (Fu et al., 2023).

Comparatively, individuals presenting with weaknesses in ToM have been found to present with so-called deficits in their social functioning. In 1985, Baron-Cohen et al. first hypothesised a ToM deficit in autistic individuals (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985); this is reportedly one of the most cited accounts of autism and has been understood by scholars to underpin the core diagnostic criteria for autism outlined by the DSM-5 (Tager-Flusberg et al., 2001).

ToM developments have been perceived by stakeholders to be a benefit of facilitating CABP when working with autistic mainstream secondary school students. For example, biopoem writing, students gained an understanding of how historical figure’s actions and behaviours are influenced by emotions and beliefs, which are “shaped by the significant events of their lives” (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019, p. 175). Kehl (2021) outlined that through theatre, autistic students gained transferable skills for reading people and emotions. By providing historical context, a different participant “was able to unpack these larger ideas related to social knowledge and scaffold the students’ understanding” (Asaro-Saddler et al.,

2019, p. 174). One autistic individual successfully made associations between a historical figure's contributions to history and the contributions that she would like to make in her community today (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019). Further, Mendez-Martinez and Fernandez-Rio (2021) found improvement in both spontaneity and imagination. Asaro-Saddler et al. (2019), however, referred most frequently to ToM improvements. During and after the intervention, students could: (a) undertake mental state attribution, with a degree of understanding thoughts and feelings, (b) interpret the emotions of historical figures and themselves, (c) engage in perspective-taking thought processes regarding self and others, (d) use gained imaginative and perspective-taking skills to compose a biopoem regarding self and others (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019).

2.4.2.1.3. CABP as a safe space

“Safe space” was discussed across multiple papers. One autistic participant suggested that by taking risks in a playful environment, “I forgot the shame, because here we did nonsense... some embarrassment at the beginning, then less, less, less... until I was ok” (Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021, p. 492). Kehl (2021) supports this, noting that the theatre arts is an accommodating environment for autistic individuals, which can offer a feeling of safety and security whilst partaking; “those are the scaffolds that the theatre environment provides” (p. 93). Further, another participant observed the accepting nature of performing arts students, “theatre is a safe environment for students with ASD to grow in their social skills and to create friendships” (p. 117).

2.4.2.1.4. CABP and academic development

Academic factors in this context include students’ development of literary skills and the delivery of CABP in the mainstream classroom. Here, literary skills are both those which are

learned before learning to read and write (Rimmer et al., 2022), and those developed socially and developed in the classroom throughout schooling. Through biopoem writing, students in one study developed skills in interpreting text, paraphrasing, summarising, as well as developing their vocabulary and content understanding. In summary, “the process of biopoem writing provided opportunities for students to integrate and expand their content knowledge, academic literacy skills, and social–emotional understanding” (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019, p. 185). Wiltshire (2021) similarly discusses the development of visual literacy skills through art making whilst communicating through AAC devices: “Any communication taking place during this art making session was facilitated by the para [teaching assistant] to promote visual literacy” (p. 84). During and following the intervention, autistic students were able to discuss visual arts concepts, consistently use arts-based language, discuss the current project and identify items and match them to the symbols on their AAC device (Wiltshire, 2021).

Additionally the “Delivery” of CABP by educators was perceived to be a benefit when working with autistic mainstream secondary school students. A participant from Kehl (2021) believed in the importance of being “okay with having different approaches with each and every child, especially if they’re autistic. I think that you’ve got to be flexible” (p. 85). Further, the use of a variety of modes of delivery, designed to accommodate each participant’s need, fostered the aforementioned development in visual literacy (Wiltshire, 2021). The modes of delivery could be music, tactile matter, written directions, printouts, Universal Design for Learning, and photographs. Benefits of this include: “When I make these types of directions they can be modified by words or steps for each student’s ability, or for the expectations I have for a particular student” (Wiltshire, 2021, p. 86).

2.4.2.1.5. CABP and personal developments

Personal developments included any improvements in resilience and creative independence

an individual may make. Improvements were seen in autistic students' confidence (Kehl, 2021), and self-esteem (Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021). As well as gaining experience receiving positive feedback from audiences, teachers or peers, students also improved in maturity as they developed their ability to take constructive criticism regarding their work: "it was impressive to see her work through the big disappointment and making the best of it and moving on" (Kehl, 2021, p. 83). This was supported by a different perspective that an autistic student's resilience improved through dealing with rejection in an audition-type process; "they may not get the part that they want, but they do get a role, and [...] they grow from that" (Kehl, 2021, p. 83). Improvements were similarly seen in motivation, thanks to gained confidence in a task due to repeated exposure (Wiltshire, 2021), patience, through a developing ToM (Kehl, 2021), and personal development as a whole. "Those kids have experienced tremendous amounts of growth as human beings as they interact with each other" (p. 76).

A participant in Kehl (2021) found that the dramatic arts allowed autistic students to express "creative independence" through individualised character development; further, they found arts in general to encourage interactions with peers that may not have been possible otherwise: "Interacting with other students really gives her the opportunity to be hilarious and to just show off" (p. 89). This was supported by Wiltshire (2021) who noted the benefits of making space for self-expression through available materials. Students expressed their creative ideas in their choice of materials, elements and artistic principles; through their choices, these autistic students were both artists and communicators (Wiltshire, 2021).

2.4.2.2. Risks associated with CABP

2.4.2.2.1. CABP and overstimulation

Only one risk associated with facilitating CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school

students has been identified, in Kehl (2021): “overstimulation”. Kehl (2021) reflected that their “participants shared their perception that theatre arts can be overstimulating for students with ASD at times” (p. 95). This overstimulation reportedly resulted in stimming behaviours from the autistic individuals, including hands over ears, yelling or rocking back and forth, rolling on the floor, sitting under chairs or tables and needing frequent breaks. There were a variety of factors documented to necessitate stimming behaviours, such as auditory input, too much movement, frustrations and unwanted physical touch. It was also noted, however, that students were able to overcome these obstacles through self-advocacy, which CABP supported them to develop.

There are undoubtedly further risks associated with facilitating CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school students not noted across the five studies under discussion here. For example, some teachers have poor attitudes towards creativity in the classroom (Fasko, 2001), or the “skills one needs to earn high grades are often quite different from those one needs to be creative” (Sternberg & Lubart, 1991, p. 612). This poses a question: why were these negatives not captured in the data?

2.4.2.3. Limitations of pre-existing literature at this intersection

While the above synthesis highlights a significant number of perceived benefits associated with CABP compared to fewer perceived risks, there are a number of limitations to the pool of literature which ought to be borne in mind. The following paragraphs outline methodological, outcome-based, and conceptual limitations evident across the reviewed studies.

The first limitation of this synthesis is the small-scale nature of much of the existing literature. Several of the studies are single-case designs or involve very limited cohorts of autistic mainstream secondary school students (e.g., Drapete, 2017; Wiltshire, 2021). Whilst

this does not diminish the value of the participants' insights, the reliance on small samples does limit the generalisability of findings across broader autistic mainstream secondary school student populations. Alongside this, the implementation of CABP was often of short duration, sometimes lasting only a few weeks (Drapete, 2017), meaning that it is unclear whether any perceived benefits were sustained over the longer term. Finally, non-autistic stakeholder voices were disproportionately represented; as has been the case in other autism-focused research; teachers and researchers acted as the epistemic authority, while the perceptions of autistic students themselves were less consistently prioritised. Only one study, albeit minimally, included the voices of autistic students at all (Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021).

The outcomes reported across the five studies also illustrate an overwhelmingly positive picture, with only one study explicitly identifying a risk associated with CABP (Kehl, 2021). This strong emphasis on socio-emotional, academic, and personal benefits may reflect a degree of positivity bias (Dawson & Fletcher Watson, 2022), raising questions about the comprehensiveness of the evidence base.

Finally, much of the presented evidence exists within a corrective ideological framing of autism (Robinson & Crane, 2025), which suggests that autistic students should “improve” by aligning themselves with non-autistic standards. For instance, improvements in theory of mind (ToM) are frequently framed in relation to deficit-based models of autism originating in Baron-Cohen et al. (1985). While these models remain influential, they have been critiqued for oversimplifying autistic cognition and neglecting neurodiversity-affirming perspectives (Bamicha & Drigas, 2022; Tager-Flusberg et al., 2001). Consequently, claims regarding ToM “improvements” risk reinforcing deficit narratives rather than recognising alternative, equally valid ways of thinking. Similarly, the strong emphasis on peer relationships, communication,

and teamwork may inadvertently present autistic differences as a problem to be “fixed” rather than valued (e.g., Kehl, 2021). In addition, while “safe spaces” were reported as an important benefit of CABP (Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021), little attention was given to possible hidden challenges such as masking, conformity pressures, or vulnerability to rejection, which may not be captured through teacher- or researcher-led accounts.

2.5 This thesis

2.5.1. Overarching problems

At the onset of this research project, a number of overarching problems illustrated the need for further research at the intersection of autism and CABP. Autistic students continue to face challenges in accessing inclusive education within mainstream secondary schools. The Children's Commissioner for England has noted that autistic students in mainstream settings often have difficulty securing adequate support, with over 45% of EHCP appeals in the 2023–2024 academic year citing insufficiently allocated educational provisions for these students (Children's Commissioner's Office, 2024). The Department for Education also recognises that structural inequalities can result in some students leaving education without the qualifications and skills needed to succeed in society (Department for Education, 2023). These national statistics suggest ongoing gaps in the implementation of inclusive education policies. Traditional pedagogical approaches, which are generally designed for allistic learners, may limit opportunities for autistic students to participate fully and achieve their potential. Together, these patterns point to persistent challenges in mainstream education for autistic learners and underscore the need for research that addresses both policy and practice in supporting inclusion.

While inclusive pedagogical frameworks such as CABP offer promising means of addressing barriers to educational participation, their implementation in mainstream secondary schools remains inconsistent. Structural, attitudinal, and environmental barriers appear to obstruct their use. Collectively, these problems demonstrate the need for research that centres autistic perspectives, challenges pathology-focused ontological frameworks, and explores the practical application of inclusive pedagogical approaches such as CABP with autistic students in mainstream educational contexts.

Finally, autism research has historically been dominated by allistic researchers, resulting in the perpetuation of pathology-focused ontologies of autism. This dominance has contributed to persistent epistemic injustice, whereby autistic voices have been excluded from knowledge production about autism. This is particularly evident at the intersection of autism research, and research concerning CABP. As a result, autistic experiences have frequently been framed through deficit-based models and corrective ideologies which benchmark autistic abilities against allistic norms rather than recognising autistic strengths and perspectives.

2.5.2. Gaps in research at the onset of this project

Considering these problems, four specific gaps in research can be identified at the onset of this thesis. First, empirical research examining the use of CABP with autistic secondary school students is particularly limited; many of the small number of existing studies relied on small-scale or single-case designs of short duration, thereby restricting generalisability and transferability. Further the limited available evidence presents an overwhelmingly positive picture of CABP, identifying socio-emotional, academic, and personal benefits while identifying minimal risks. This illustrates that there is, perhaps, a positivity bias in the field which raises questions about the trustworthiness of the evidence base.

Next, autistic voices are absent from much of the existing literature. Where autistic students have been included, their perceptions have often been marginalised in favour of allistic accounts; this risks reproducing epistemic injustice and overlooking the insider knowledge of autistic students themselves. The lack of participatory research means that current understandings of CABP are predominantly shaped by external, allistic perceptions, rather than those of autistic individuals themselves.

Finally, paradigmatic limitations in the literature are evident. Outcomes of CABP are frequently framed within a pathology-focused paradigm, for example by reporting autistic students' improvements in ToM according to non-autistic standards. Such framings risk reinforcing corrective ideologies rather than supporting neurodiversity-affirmative ontologies of autism which value autistic ways of being.

Considering these gaps in research, it would appear important that future research: (1) broadens the empirical evidence base at the intersection of research on autism and CABP; (2) ensures autistic voices are central to that empirical evidence; (3) addresses the existing positivity bias; and (4) is critically examined, and outcomes are conceptualised in ways that align with neurodiversity-affirmative paradigms.

This thesis was designed to address these gaps in research by using a neurodiversity affirmative paradigmatic framework to critically examine both the benefits and risks associated with CABP when it is implemented with autistic mainstream secondary school students; autistic voices will be central to the inquiry. The following paragraphs outline the specific aims and research questions that guided this project.

2.5.3. Project aims and research questions

As previously outlined, the overarching aims of the thesis are: (1) to collate the perceptions of teachers and autistic students in mainstream secondary schools on CABP and factors that

could promote or obstruct the use of CABP with autistic young people in mainstream secondary schools; and (2) to use those perspectives to co-design a manifesto outlining next steps, which can be used to influence policy and practice. With that in mind, this thesis will respond to the following overarching research questions:

- How do autistic students and mainstream secondary school teachers in England perceive CABP?
- What factors do autistic students and mainstream secondary school teachers in England identify as promoting and obstructing teachers' use of CABP in mainstream secondary school classrooms?
- What do autistic students and mainstream secondary school teachers in England consider essential for the future of CABP?
- How do autistic young people believe their autism affects their views on CABP?

2.5.4 Methods

In section 2.5.2, I identified that future research should broaden the empirical evidence base at the intersection of research on autism and CABP, ensure autistic voices are central to that empirical evidence, address the existing positivity bias in the field and should be critically examined, and outcomes are conceptualised in ways that align with neurodiversity-affirmative paradigms. These focuses led to my methodological decisions, including my decision to use questionnaire- and interview-based methods to support the systematic review included in this thesis.

While this thesis advocates for the use of creative and flexible approaches when working with autistic young people, such approaches were not adopted within the included

studies. At the outset of the project, creative methods for collecting data were considered (including a vignette-based study using examples of CABP to explore autistic students' perspectives, and an observational study examining CABP within educational practice). However, the narrative literature review discussed in the introduction of this thesis indicated that the existing evidence base was limited. In particular, there was insufficient empirical research examining CABP and autism, and the perspectives of key stakeholders (especially autistic young people) were rarely gathered. Consequently, it remained unclear whether stakeholders viewed CABP as desirable, appropriate, or feasible when teaching autistic students within mainstream secondary school contexts.

In light of this, a study focused on systematically gathering stakeholder perspectives from both autistic students and teachers was considered a necessary preliminary step in developing the evidence base. Questionnaire and interview methods were therefore selected as structured approaches capable of effectively capturing these perspectives. These studies provide foundational insights which can subsequently inform future research, including the potential development of more creative or participatory approaches.

2.5.5 Overview of the project

This research project consists of three studies. Study One (Chapter 3) is a convergent integrated mixed-methods systematic review, exploring how effectively creative arts-based educational practices have been used with autistic children and young people aged 11-19 (i.e., secondary school age or equivalent). A decision was made to focus on creative arts-based educational practices more widely for the review, rather than CABP alone, due to the limited literature (5 reports) at the more specific intersection (see Doyle & Kim, 2025 and *Section 2.4.1* of this thesis for a detailed discussion of these 5 reports). Study Two (Chapter 4) is a

qualitative questionnaire study, with mainstream secondary school teachers in England as participants; this study collated teachers' perceptions on the benefits and risks, and barriers and facilitators associated with using CABP with autistic students. Study Three (Chapter 5) focused on the voices of autistic mainstream secondary school students themselves. Their perceptions of how CABP was and should be used in their school were collated through a qualitative interview study, conducted via zoom. *Chapters 3-5* are presented as papers. *Chapter 6* presents a short overview of the methodological process and output of this thesis, a CABP Manifesto, which will be discussed in greater depth within *Chapter 7, Discussion*.

3. Creative arts-based educational practices with 11-19 year old autistic students: A convergent integrated mixed-method systematic review

3.1. Introduction

The creative arts (drama, music, dance, visual arts and creative languages such as poetry and creative writing) have long been considered integral to human learning and development. For example, Dewey (1934) argued that the creative arts do not exist on one's periphery; rather, they are central to our capacity to make meaning, experience the world, and participate in society. In educational contexts, the creative arts have been shown to provide multimodal and embodied ways of learning, offering alternatives to predominantly verbal instruction. This means that the creative arts can be powerful in reaching students whose needs are not fully met by traditional teaching methods (Eisner, 2002; Hall et al., 2007; Wright, 2015).

In practice, the ways the creative arts are operationalised with autistic learners in secondary schools¹ varies depending on their aims, settings, and facilitators (Bradt & Goodill, 2013). Further, literature often uses overlapping or inconsistent terminology (Karkou & Glasman, 2004). For conceptual clarity, we adopt the umbrella term “creative arts-based educational practices” (CAEPs).

3.1.1. Creative arts-based educational practices

The first CAEP to be defined is creative arts therapy (CAT), a psychotherapeutic approach in which trained therapists or psychologists use creative arts to target and remediate individual therapeutic issues (Bradt & Goodill, 2013; van Westrhenen & Fritz, 2014). For instance, in

¹ Here, and throughout the manuscript, the British term “secondary schools” is used to refer to schools which educate 11-19 year old students. As this report is international in scope, the term is inclusive of all international equivalents, including middle schools and high schools which educate students between the ages of 11 and 19.

drama therapy, students can confront and reframe difficult thoughts through improvisation, role play, role reversal, and metaphor in a structured environment (Xiao, 2025). Within this review, CAT refers specifically to one-to-one, school-based therapeutic processes facilitated by qualified therapists or psychologists. The literature often conflates CAT with creative arts interventions (CAIs), despite their conceptual differences. CAIs are one-to-one or small-group, classroom-based practices led by educators rather than therapists, and they generally focus on educational outcomes. For example, the “Speech Bubbles” CAI develops students’ receptive and expressive language by guiding them through story-making, preparing performance space, and storytelling in character (Briguglio et al., 2022; Londesborough et al., 2017; Bohling et al., 2021).

A third practice, creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP), differs by scale and orientation; CABP involves whole-class facilitation and is a social constructivist pedagogical approach for interactive, collaborative, multimodal (Crane & Baggerly, 2013), creative arts-based teaching and learning. CABP focuses on the way a teacher teaches, rather than what is being taught, so it can be applied to a wide range of educational contexts (e.g., Doyle & Kim, 2025). An example of CABP is the alphabet song, where the alphabet is taught to children rhythmically, using a recognisable, catchy tune (Kumar et al., 2022). Finally, creative arts programmes, such as choirs or music ensembles, represent structured extracurricular activities that extend learning beyond the classroom. These will also be included within the scope of this mixed-method systematic review (MMSR).

3.1.2. Existing literature reviews

Across existing literature reviews at the intersection of research into autism and CAEPs, findings are consistently and overwhelmingly positive, with evidence pointing to a variety of benefits. Reported outcomes include improvements in socio-emotional development, such as

improved self-expression, confidence, and peer relationships; sensory benefits, such as greater regulation and tolerance of sensory stimuli; physical and motor improvements, including coordination and fine motor control; and behavioural outcomes, such as increased attention, engagement, and reduction in unwanted behaviours (Ivers, 2024; López-Escribano & Orío-Aparicio, 2024; Marquez-Garcia et al., 2022; Vogel et al., 2024). This evidence highlights the potential for the creative arts not only to support autistic students' learning but also to contribute to their broader well-being and participation in school. However, there are limitations to existing literature reviews which must be borne in mind.

First, authors have generally considered CAEPs by practice (i.e., therapy, intervention) and by creative art form (i.e., art, dance). It is conceivable that there could be transferable outcomes which could be of use to practitioners exploring other art forms or practices. This is particularly important as literature reviews appear to focus more on some practices (i.e., CAT), and some art forms (i.e., music), than others. Literature reviews also appear to focus on either qualitative or quantitative reports. There are benefits to including mixed-methods research in literature reviews, particularly as mixed methods research is said to deepen understanding by exploring individuals' experience in (qualitative), and the effectiveness of (quantitative) a phenomenon (Wasti et al., 2022). There are also benefits to conducting MMSRs, which consolidate studies focusing on experiences (qualitative), and effectiveness (quantitative; (Wasti et al., 2022) of the field. Such a holistic overview of the entire pool of research at this intersection was considered to be a gap in research.

Second, research which identifies benefits of CAEPs has generally focused on young autistic students (e.g., Fan et al., 2024; Geretsegger et al., 2014; López-Escribano & Orío-Aparicio, 2024; Schweizer et al., 2014; Vogel et al., 2024), which raises questions about CAEPs' efficacy with older populations; no literature reviews have been found to explore CAEPs with secondary school students, therefore this was identified to be a gap in research.

Finally, existing literature reviews at the intersection of autism research and research exploring CAEPs have been conducted within a corrective, pathology-focused paradigm. This paradigm frames autism as a deficit within the individual which requires correction, and categorises autistic people as “atypical” and “impaired” in comparison to “typical” allistic norms (Robinson & Crane, 2025). It could be argued that, when framed this way, the largely positive presented outcomes of CAEPs have been misrepresented (Hobson et al., 2023) and would not be perceived as benefits if framed by a neurodiversity affirmative paradigm, which is more widely accepted by the autistic community (Shaw et al., 2024).

3.1.3. Neurodiversity Affirmative Paradigm

Defined by Shaw et al. (2024) a neurodiversity paradigm is an overarching paradigmatic framework which recognises that society comprises neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals, and considers both to be equally valuable. A neurodiversity paradigm rejects pathology-focused perceptions of neurodivergence (Rebecchi, 2025), and instead views neurological variation as natural and meaningful (Dmyterko, 2025).

Researchers aligned with a neurodiversity affirmative paradigm recognise neurological differences non-hierarchically (Shaw et al., 2024); this is commonly evidenced by use of identity first (i.e., autistic person rather than person with autism) language, as recommended by many autistic individuals in England (Shaw et al., 2022). Further, within a neurodiversity affirmative paradigmatic approach, research on autism should be centred around autistic individuals and their perceptions (Shaw et al., 2024). Therefore, research undertaken “by” and “with” the autistic community, rather than “for” or “on” them (Van Schaik, 2021) is a priority.

No existing literature reviews were found to have applied a neurodiversity affirmative paradigm when discussing research exploring autism and CAEPs. As this paradigmatic

approach is more widely accepted by the autistic community (Shaw et al., 2024), an exploration of research at this intersection from a neurodiversity affirmative perspective was considered to be an epistemological and ethical gap.

3.1.4. The current study

This paper reports on findings from a convergent integrated mixed method systematic review (MMSR), which aimed to synthesise empirical evidence on CAEPs with autistic students in secondary schools, to report on methodological approaches and research findings, to identify any remaining gaps in research and to recommend directions for future studies. The overarching research question is: How successfully have the creative arts been used with autistic students in secondary education?

3.2. Methods

This pre-registered (osf.io/n43bp) convergent integrated MMSR was conducted in line with the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) statement (Page et al., 2021) and systematic review reporting guidance from three papers (Hong et al., 2018; Lockwood et al., 2015; Page et al., 2021; Stern et al., 2021). It was conducted using Covidence, a systematic review management system.

3.2.1. Search Strategy

The search was performed in December 2024 (and re-run in January 2025). Four principal search topics were used: (*creative arts, education, practices and autistic students*) based on the MMSR research questions, which were then developed into the following search terms: (*Drama OR Theatre OR Dance OR Music OR Art OR Creative*) AND (*school OR education*)

AND (*intervention* OR *therapy* OR *teach** OR *pedagogy* OR *instruct**) AND (*Autis** OR *ASD* OR *ASC* OR *AD*).

3.2.2. Information Sources

The databases searched were: British Education Index, ERIC, Performing Arts Periodicals, PsycInfo, SCOPUS, Web of Science, Applied Social Science Index, and Linguistic & Language Behaviour Abstracts. Unpublished studies and grey literature were found through ProQuest Dissertation & Thesis.

3.2.3. Study Inclusion

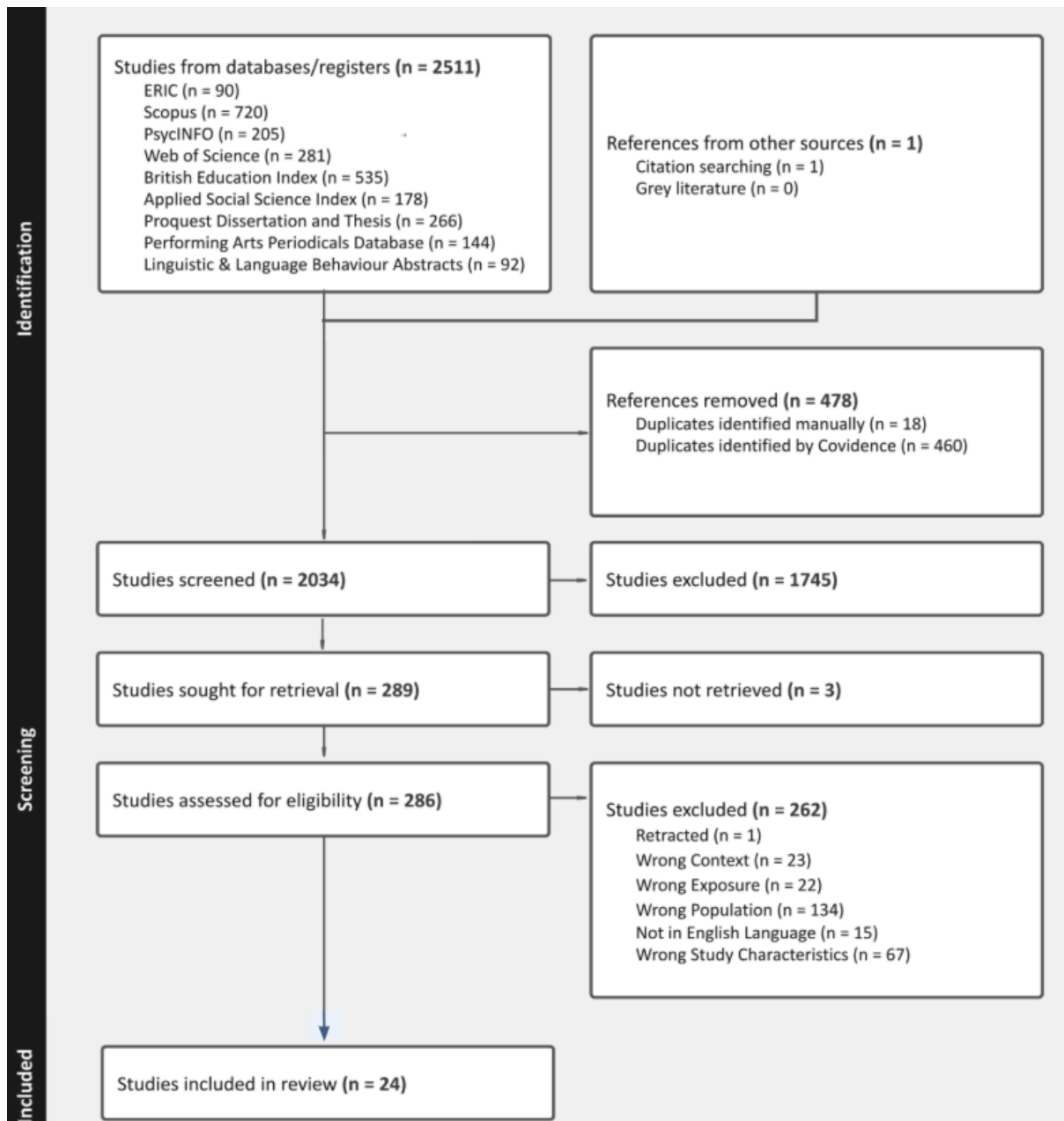
Search hits from each database were exported, combined in Covidence and duplicates were removed, resulting in 2,034 studies for stage one screening. Inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 3.1) were applied to the title and abstract of each study. Next, 286 studies were screened at stage two, full text screening. Inclusion and exclusion was based on the same criteria. At stage two, 262 studies were excluded (Figure 3.1 illustrates the rationale for exclusion). The first author screened 100% of the studies, the second author double screened 10%, and the third author double screened 5% of the studies at both stages. No disagreements arose between the reviewers. Following screening, 24 reports remained (see Figure 3.1 for the PRISMA diagram; Page et al., 2021).

Table 3.1*Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria*

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Topic	Creative arts-based pedagogy School-based creative arts interventions School-based creative arts therapies	Non-creative arts-based pedagogy, interventions or therapies.
Setting	Secondary schools (and int. equiv) Middle school High school 16+ college / sixth form college <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Including grammar schools ● Including private schools ● Including special provision schools 	Early years Primary school University Non-school-based contexts
Participants	Anyone involved in the implementation of creative arts educational practices in education with autistic students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Autistic students ● Parents/ carers of autistic students (where appropriate) ● Teachers ● Teaching assistants ● Therapists ● Researchers ● Other stakeholders in education 	Doctors Nurses Any other medical professionals
Language	English	Not English
Study Design	Any empirical research design	Systematic reviews, conference proceedings
Publication Status	Published or unpublished reports in the public domain	N/A

Figure 3.1

PRISMA Diagram



3.2.4. Assessment of Methodological Quality

Quality appraisal of 24 studies was conducted independently by the first author, who used the mixed method appraisal tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018). The MMAT is designed to appraise the quality of studies across five types of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method design. Appraisers assess the quality of a study by answering ‘yes’ (Y), ‘no’ (N) or ‘unsure’ (U) to

five questions relevant to its research design (Hong et al., 2018). As methodological quality was a factor for synthesis in the current review, no studies were excluded at the quality appraisal stage. Therefore, following screening and quality appraisal, 24 reports remained and were subsequently included in the MMSR.

3.2.5. Data Extraction, Transformation and Integration

The authors extracted qualitative and quantitative data in-line with Stern et al's. (2021) approach, as described below. First, general details such as title and author were extracted. Following this, the first author took a convergent integrated approach to data synthesis, extracting qualitative and quantitative data and transforming them into a mutually compatible qualitative format (Stern et al., 2021). Here, qualitative findings from qualitative ($n = 15$) and mixed method ($n = 3$) studies were extracted alongside an illustration (i.e. a direct quote from the report).

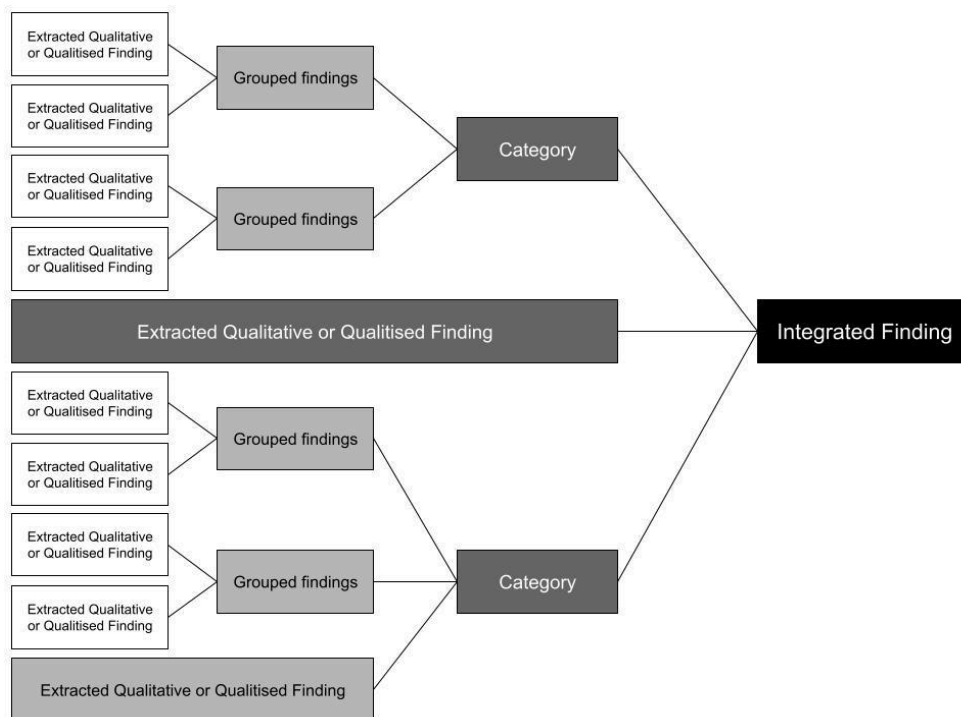
Next, data transformation and integration was conducted on quantitative data from quantitative ($n = 6$) and mixed method ($n = 3$) studies (Stern et al., 2021). Quantitative data were qualitised or transformed into textual narratives which addressed the research questions. For example, a repeated measures analysis which outlined pre and post values of neuromuscular coordination demonstrated that a dance intervention improved autistic students' neuromuscular coordination (Arzoglou et al., 2013). Therefore, the extracted textual narrative was: "a dance intervention improved autistic students' neuromuscular coordination". Textual narratives were supported by an illustration in NVivo. Continuing on this example, the illustration was the pre and post values of neuromuscular coordination that demonstrated that a dance intervention improved autistic students' neuromuscular coordination (Arzoglou et al., 2013). Once the textual narratives and illustrations were extracted, they were integrated with the qualitised data to form *findings* for synthesis.

3.2.6. Qualitative Approach to Data Synthesis

Data synthesis also mirrored Stern et al's. (2021) approach; resultantly, the first author began by repeatedly and comprehensively examining the *extracted findings*. If two or more findings shared meaning (e.g., “stakeholders perceived that music is an accessible therapeutic medium” and “stakeholders perceived that music therapy is accessible and affordable”), they were organised into *grouped findings* (e.g., “Music therapy is accessible”). Next, the findings and grouped findings were categorised based on shared meaning (i.e., “CABP participation facilitates theory of mind development” and “CABP participation facilitates communication development” were categorised into “CABP participation facilitates socio-emotional development”). Finally, categories were synthesised into *integrated findings* (Stern et al., 2021). The synthesis process is illustrated in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2

Illustration of Qualitative Approach to Data Synthesis



3.3. Results

3.3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Study characteristics were extracted according to year, location, report type, participants, setting, design and methods, creative art form and practice (see Table 3.2). Included reports were qualitative ($n = 15$), quantitative ($n = 6$) and mixed methods ($n = 3$); 14 were published articles, and 10 were theses. Of these articles and theses, nine reported on case studies, six on interventions, four on interviews, three on observations, one on instructional discourse analysis, and one was a practice paper (i.e., a professional therapist discussing one of their patients' experiences and outcomes). Reports were published across a 30 year span (between 1993 and 2023); however, only three reports were published before 2011 (see Table 3.2).

Included research was conducted in America ($n = 13$), England ($n = 5$), Canada ($n = 2$), Ireland ($n = 1$), South Africa ($n = 1$), Greece ($n = 1$), Turkey ($n = 1$), and Spain ($n = 1$). Data were collected from 262 participants, 143 of whom were autistic students (Male = 86; Female = 22; unknown gender = 35) between 11 and 19 years old. Of the remaining participants, 54 were teachers or educators who worked with autistic students, 42 were parents, 18 were teen mentors, five were therapists or psychologists, and one was an autistic students' support worker. There was not enough data available to conduct an intersectional analysis of participants' data.

Data were collected across 10 special provision secondary schools, three mainstream and one private elementary or middle schools, five mainstream high schools, and one mainstream college. Four authors either noted various educational contexts within which data were collected or did not specify the type of school in which they collected data. Finally, nine reports focused on music, seven on drama, six on art, and one each on dance and creative language. Practices included creative arts-based educational interventions ($n = 10$), pedagogy ($n = 6$), therapy ($n = 4$), and programmes ($n = 4$).

Table 3.2*Included Study Characteristics*

No.	Location	Author (Year)	Type	Participants	Setting	Design	Methods	Modality	Practice
1	USA	Gunter, P. L., Fox, J. J., McEvoy, M. A., Shores, R. E. & Denny, R. K. (1993)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 1 (M) Occupation: Student Age (range): 14	Elementary School	Quantitative Non-randomised	Intervention, Multiple Baseline	Music	Intervention
2	America	Orr, T. J., Myles, B. S. & Carlson, J. K (1998)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 1 (F) Occupation: Student Age (range): 11	Special Provision Secondary School	Quantitative Non-randomised	Intervention, Multiple Baseline	Music	Intervention
3	England	Loyd, D. (2011)	Thesis	Quantity (Gender): 4 (M), 6 (F) Occupation: Student Age (range): 16-19	Special Provision Secondary School	Mixed Methods	Observations, Interviews, Survey, Document Analysis	Drama	Intervention
4	America	Burdick, C. (2011)	Thesis	Quantity (Gender): 9 (M), 4 (F) Occupation: Student Age (range): 11-18 & 15 School staff 7 Parents	Various	Qualitative	Observations, Interviews, Document Analysis, Grounded theory	Art	Programme
5	South Africa	White, J. L. K. (2011)	Thesis	Quantity (Gender): 6 (F) Occupation: 3 parents, 3 teachers	Special Provision Secondary School	Qualitative	Interviews	Music	Therapy
6	England	Kempe, A. & Tissot, C. (2012)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 2 (F) Occupation: Student Age (range): Teenagers	Special Provision Secondary School	Qualitative	Case Study(s)	Drama	Pedagogy

7	Greece	Arzoglou, D., Tsimaras, V., Kotsikas, G., Fotiadou, E., Sidiropoulou, M., Proios, M. & Bassa, E. (2013)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 10 (U*) Occupation: Student Age (range): 15-18	Special Provision Secondary School	Quantitative Non-random ised	Intervention, Multiple Baseline	Dance	Intervention
8	America	Cardella, C. (2014)	Thesis	Quantity (Gender): 12 (U) Occupation: Teachers & 10 parents	Various	Qualitative	Interviews	Music	Programme
9	America	Devereaux, C (2017)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 13 (F) Occupation: School staff	Special Provision Secondary School	Qualitative	Interviews	Dance	Therapy
10	America	Müller, E., Nutting, D. & Keddell, K (2017)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 21 (U*) Occupation: Student Age (range): 11-14 & 10 School staff 18 Teen Mentors 29 Parents	Special Provision Secondary School	Qualitative	Interviews, Surveys, Focus Groups	Drama	Programme
11	Canada	Lindblom, A. (2017)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 1 (F) Occupation: Student Age (range): 16 & 1 Mother 2 School staff 1 Music therapist, 1 Support worker	High School	Qualitative	Ethnography	Music	Intervention
12	England	Burrows, K. (2017)	Thesis	Quantity (Gender): 4 (M) Occupation: Student Age (range): 16-19	College (16+)	Qualitative	Autoethnographic Case Study	Art	Intervention

13	Turkey	Çevirgen, A., Aktaş, B. & Koti, M. (2018)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 1 (M) Occupation: Student Age (range): 13 & 2 parent 1 school staff	Not specified	Qualitative	Case Study(s)	Art	Pedagogy
14	America	Smith, B. A., Tuduri, E., Mostovoy, E., Pannell, D. & Landon, C. (2019)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 21 (M), 2 (F) Occupation: Students Age (range): 11-19	Special Provision Secondary School	Quantitative Non-randomised	Intervention, Multiple Baseline	Music	Intervention
15	Spain	Mendez-Martinez, E. & Fernandez-Rio, J. (2021)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 10 (M), 1 (F) Occupation: Students Age (range): 12-19 & 4 Psychologist	High School	Qualitative	Case Study(s)	Drama	Pedagogy
16	America	Hogle, L. A. (2021)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 1 (M) Occupation: Student Age (range): 16	High School	Qualitative	Case Study(s)	Music	Programme
17	America	Wiltshire, M. E. (2021)	Thesis	Quantity (Gender): 2 (M), 1 (F) Occupation: Student Age (range): 14-15 & 4 School staff	High School	Qualitative	Case Study(s)	Art	Pedagogy
18	America	Kehl, D. (2021)	Thesis	Quantity (Gender): 6 (U) Occupation: Drama Teachers	Middle School	Qualitative	Transcendental Phenomenological	Drama	Pedagogy
19	Canada	Dahary, H., Sivathasan, S. & Quintin, E. M. (2022)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 23 (M), 2 (F) Occupation: Student Age (range): 12-16	High School	Quantitative Non-randomised	Mixed Design ANOVA	Music	Intervention

20	America	Kong, S. (2023)	Thesis	Quantity (Gender): 2 (F) Occupation: Student Age (range): 11-13	Special Provision Secondary School	Quantitative Non-random ised	Intervention, Multiple Baseline	Music	Therapy
21	England	Nevers-Ashton, N. (2023)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 1 (M) Occupation: Student Age (range): 13	Special Provision Secondary School	Qualitative	Practice Paper	Art	Therapy
22	Ireland	Karnezi, H. (2008)	Thesis	Quantity (Gender): 9 (M) Occupation: Student Age (range): 11-13	Mainstream School	Mixed methods	Intervention, Observations	Drama	Intervention
23	America	Asaro-Saddler, K., Ellis-Robinson, T., Eacker, H. (2019)	Article	Quantity (Gender): 3 (U) Occupation: Student Age (range): 12-13	Middle School	Qualitative	Instructional Discourse Analysis	Creative Language	Pedagogy
24	America	Drapete, D. (2017)	Thesis	Quantity (Gender): 1 (M) Occupation: Student Age (range): 16	Private School	Mixed methods	Case Study(s)	Art	Intervention

3.3.2. *Quality Appraisal*

Each study was assessed against the mixed methods appraisal tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018). Quality appraisal (QA) scores for included studies ranged from 0-7 (with 7 being the highest quality), and scores were given based on the number of yes (Y = 1), no (N = 0), and (U = 0) unsure responses to questions identified by Hong et al. (2018). The average QA score across the MMSR was 4.83 out of 7 (5 for qualitative studies, 3.33 for quantitative studies, and 7 for mixed methods studies). Theses scored more highly than articles, with an average QA score of 6.8 compared to 3.42. Each study's detailed quality appraisal (QA) score can be seen in Tables 3.3 to 3.5.

Table 3.3*Qualitative Studies Quality Appraisal*

No.	Study (Year)	Type	Design	Are there clear research questions ?	Do the collected data address the research questions?	Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?	Are the qualitative data collection methods adequate to address the research question?	Are the findings adequately derived from the data?	Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?	Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis and interpretation?	TOTAL
4	Burdick, C. (2011)	Thesis	Qualitative	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7
5	White, J. L. K. (2011)	Thesis	Qualitative	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7
6	Kempe, A. & Tissot, C. (2012)	Article	Qualitative	N	U	U	U	Y	Y	Y	3
8	Cardella, C. (2014)	Thesis	Qualitative	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7
9	Devereaux, C (2017)	Article	Qualitative	N	U	U	U	Y	Y	Y	3
10	Müller, E., Nutting, D. & Keddell, K (2017)	Article	Qualitative	N	U	U	U	Y	Y	Y	3
11	Lindblom, A. (2017)	Article	Qualitative	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	6
12	Burrows, K. (2017)	Thesis	Qualitative	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7

13	Çevirgen, A., Aktaş, B. & Koti, M. (2018)	Article	Qualitative	N	U	U	U	N	N	N	0
15	Mendez-Martinez, E. & Fernandez-Rio, J. (2021)	Article	Qualitative	N	U	U	U	Y	Y	Y	3
16	Hogle, L. A. (2021)	Article	Qualitative	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7
17	Wiltshire, M. E. (2021)	Thesis	Qualitative	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7
18	Kehl, D. (2021)	Thesis	Qualitative	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7
21	Nevers-Ashton, N. (2023)	Article	Qualitative	N	U	U	U	N	N	N	0
24	Drapete, D. (2017)	Thesis	Qualitative	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7

Table 3.4*Non-Randomised Studies Quality Appraisal*

No.	Study (Year)	Type	Design	Are there clear research questions?	Do the collected data address the research questions?	Are the participants representative of the target population?	Are measurements appropriate regarding both the outcome and intervention or exposure?	Are there complete outcome data?	Are the confounders accounted for in the design and analysis?	During the study period, is the intervention administered (or exposure occurred) as intended?	TOTAL
1	Gunter, P. L., Fox, J. J., McEvoy, M. A., Shores, R. E. & Denny, R. K. (1993)	Article	Quantitative non-randomised	N	U	N	Y	Y	N	Y	3
2	Orr, T. J., Myles, B. S. & Carlson, J. K (1998)	Article	Quantitative non-randomised	N	U	N	Y	Y	N	Y	3
7	Arzoglou, D., Tsimaras, V., Kotsikas, G., Fotiadou, E., Sidiropoulou, M., Proios, M. & Bassa, E. (2013)	Article	Quantitative non-randomised	N	U	N	Y	Y	N	Y	3
14	Smith, B. A., Tuduri, E., Mostovoy, E., Pannell, D. & Landon, C.	Article	Quantitative non-randomised	N	U	N	Y	Y	N	Y	3

	(2019)										
19	Dahary, H., Sivathasan, S. & Quintin, E. M. (2022)	Article	Quantitative non-randomised	N	U	N	Y	Y	N	Y	3
20	Kong, S. (2023)	Thesis	Quantitative non-randomised	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y	5

Table 3.5

Mixed Methods Studies Quality Appraisal

No.	Study (Year)	Type	Design	Are there clear research questions?	Do the collected data address the research questions?	Is there an adequate rationale for using a mixed methods design to address the research question?	Are the different components of the study effectively integrated to answer the research question?	Are the outputs of the integration of qualitative and quantitative components adequately interpreted?	Are divergences and inconsistencies between quantitative and qualitative results adequately addressed?	Do the different components of the study adhere to the quality criteria of each tradition of the methods involved?	TOTAL
3	Loyd, D. (2011)	Thesis	Mixed Methods	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7
22	Karnezi, H. (2008)	Thesis	Mixed methods	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7
23	Asaro-Saddler, K., Ellis-Robinson, T., Eacker, H. (2019)	Article	Qualitative	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7

3.4. Integrated Findings

Through qualitative synthesis of the 233 *extracted findings* spanning the 24 included reports, four *integrated findings* were identified: (1) perceptions of autism; (2) the nature of CAEPs; (3) CAEP outcomes; and (4) barriers and facilitators. The extracted findings will be reported objectively here, then will be contextualised within a neurodiversity affirmative paradigm in *Section 3.5. Discussion*. With that in mind, it is perhaps useful to note that some of the integrated findings which follow are aligned with a corrective and pathology-focused ideology, which is not aligned with the neurodiversity paradigmatic framing of this review. Further, although autistic participants were the subjects of research in all of the included reports, limited autistic voices were heard throughout; research was generally conducted *on* rather than *with* autistic students. As the reports from which the findings were extracted were included in the systematic review, they will be discussed objectively here. However, the extent to which corrective ideologies and deficit framing impact the validity and reliability of the integrated findings will be considered in *Section 3.5. Discussion*.

3.4.1. Perceptions of Autism

“Perceptions of autism” frames subsequent findings of this review, as stakeholders’ perceptions of autism undoubtedly influence their perception of the nature of CAEPs and researchers’ reporting of the CAEP outcomes when they are used with autistic students. A schematic synthesis of perceptions of autism can be seen in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3

A Schematic of perceptions of autism

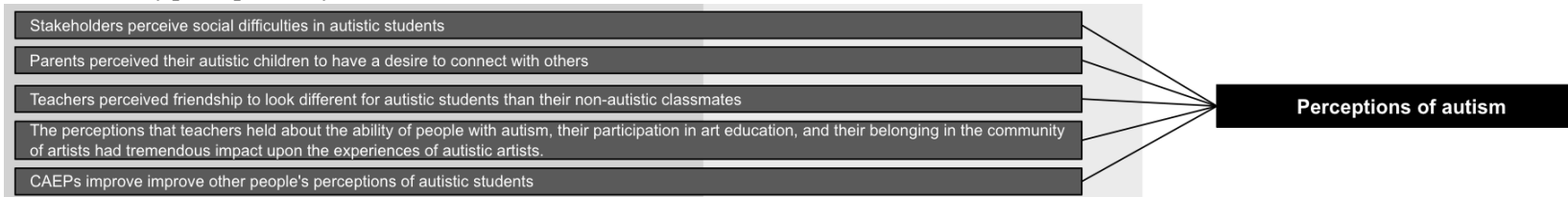
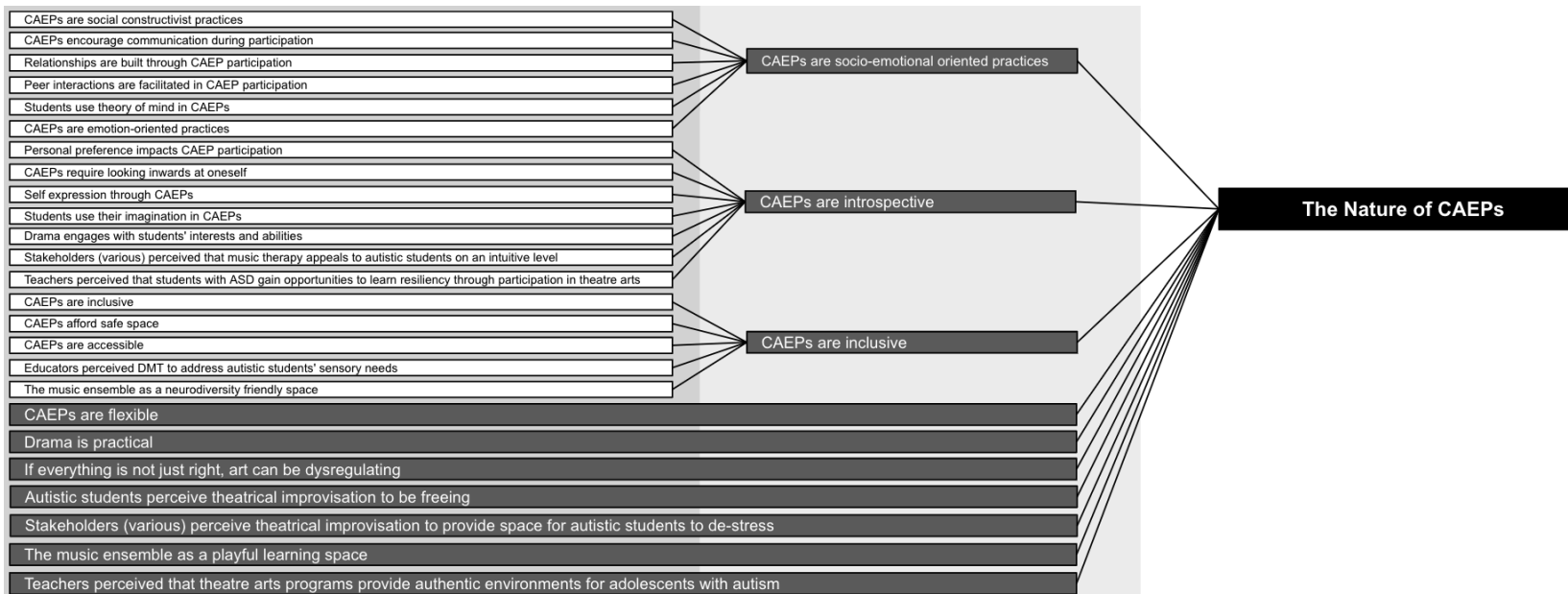


Figure 3.4

A Schematic of the nature of CAEPs



Parents and teachers' perceptions of autism were focused on autistic students' social functioning, and autistic social functioning was generally considered to be a disadvantage to autistic students. For example, 24 parents and teachers who took part in qualitative interviews with Cardella (2014) perceived social difficulties for their autistic students or children. They noted that autistic students found working in groups challenging, perhaps due to the social complexities of working in a group. Parents and teachers perceived that their autistic students had a desire to connect with others, but noted that friendships looked different for autistic students than they did for non-autistic students, which could make friendships challenging. No autistic voices were heard to either support or object to this suggestion.

Perceptions of autism were seen to impact autistic students' participation in CAEPs. For example, autistic students' experiences of participating in CAEPs were understood to be impacted by stakeholders' perceptions of the ability of autistic students (Burdick, 2011). Similarly, parents and teachers noted that autistic students' participation in CAEPs had the ability to improve other people's perceptions of autism. For example, teachers and parents perceived the attitudes of others towards their autistic students to improve following an art exhibition (Çevirgen et al., 2018). These findings were, however, extracted from qualitative reports with a limited number of participants. Further, no autistic voices were heard, so research would be needed to explore autistic students' perceptions on this idea that perceptions of autism both impact and are impacted by autistic students' CAEP participation.

3.4.2. The Nature of CAEPs

The nature of CAEPs will be broken down into three categories and seven extracted or grouped findings. Each category and extracted finding paints a similar picture concerning the nature of CAEPs as beneficial practices, which are inclusive for autistic students. A schematic synthesis of the nature of CAEPs can be seen in Figure 3.4.

3.4.2.1. Extracted and Grouped Findings

Only one potential risk associated with the nature of CAEPs was identified in one included ethnographic case study (Burdick, 2011); one parent of an autistic child suggested that unless every element of the art class was *just right*, art could be dysregulating for their child. This supports the risk of overstimulation in CAEP participation, which was identified in previous systematic reviews (e.g., Doyle & Kim, 2025). Alternatively, seven extracted findings reported benefits of CAEPs. CAEPs were perceived by parents, teachers and autistic students to be flexible (Çevirgen et al., 2018; Loyd, 2011), practical (Loyd, 2011), authentic (Kehl, 2021), playful (Hogle, 2021), and freeing learning spaces, wherein autistic students could de-stress (Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021).

A larger pool of evidence from researchers, parents and school staff supported the suggestion that CAEPs are socio-emotional oriented, introspective and inclusive, practices:

3.4.2.2. CABPs are Socio-Emotional Oriented Practices

CAEPs were perceived to be social constructivist practices. For example, a music ensemble was defined by the author of a single case study exploring the inclusion of an autistic music learner in a music ensemble, as a social constructivist learning space (Hogle, 2021). This loosely translates to CAEPs being considered active and interactive approaches to learning wherein students uncover and construct their own ideas in collaboration with peers (Saleem et al., 2021). This idea was supported by, amongst others, a small pool of teachers who perceived that their autistic students learned from their typically developing peers within a drama intervention (Karnezi, 2008).

CAEPs were also considered, by researchers and researcher/teachers to be emotion-oriented practices; through art, music and drama, autistic students were required to explore (Nevers-Ashton, 2023) and identify (Dahary et al., 2022) emotions, and demonstrate

emotional reciprocity (Loyd, 2011). Autistic students were seen to use their theory of mind (ToM) skills during CAEP participation, too. For example, whilst writing a biopoem, autistic students were required to consider others' beliefs and emotions, to express and recognise their own thoughts and feelings, and to develop an approach to reasoning about mental states (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019). A larger mixed methods study also found, through pre- and post-tests and structured observations, that autistic students demonstrated perspective taking more during a group-based drama intervention than they did in any other school-based activities (Loyd, 2011). Perhaps this could be because CAEPs offer expanded opportunities for communication, including non-verbal communication (Burdick, 2011). No evidence was found to explore whether autistic students supported the perception of CAEPs as socio-emotionally oriented.

3.4.2.3. CAEPs are Introspective

As well as being social practices, CAEPs were perceived to be introspective; this was a perceived benefit. For example, CAEPs were perceived by various stakeholders to provide opportunities for autistic students to explore their self-concept. According to teachers, three autistic students were required to explore their own emotions, as well as the emotions of others, by writing biopoems about famous individuals such as Amelia Earhart or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. During the session, the autistic students were required to think about what is important to them, and to consider *why* writing a poem about famous individuals made them think about that (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019).

CAEPs were also seen to be self-expressive practices. For example, art was considered by non-autistic stakeholders to be a means of non-verbal self-expression (Burdick, 2011). Autistic students agreed, one suggesting that they explored their own self-expression through theatrical improvisation: “when you follow a script, you do what it is told, whereas if

you improvise you do what you think, what you would like to do... what you would like to be. Through improvisation you can express more” (Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021).

3.4.2.4. CAEPs are Inclusive

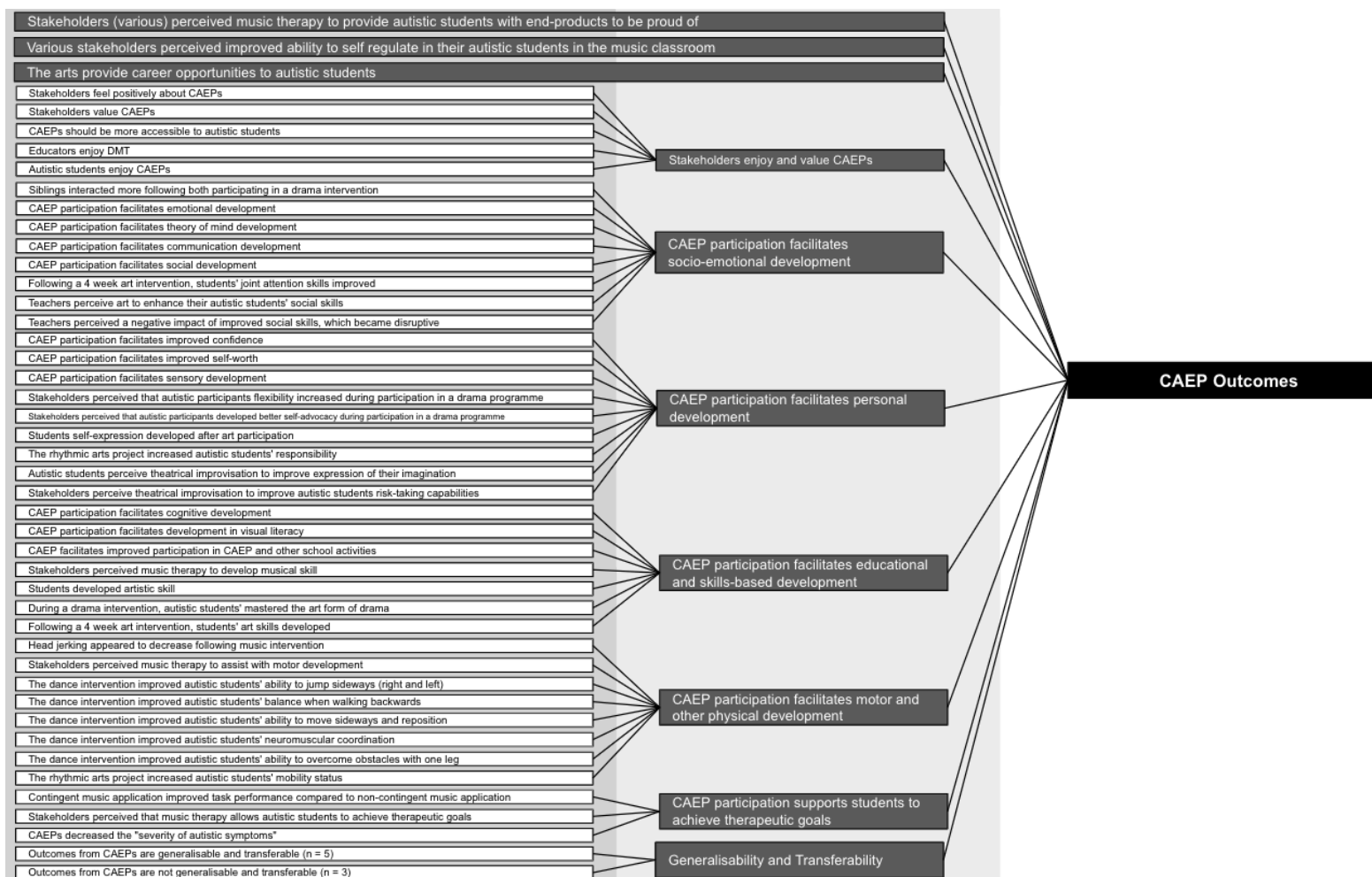
The final category exploring the nature of CAEPs suggests that CAEPs are inclusive practices. For example, parents perceived music therapy to be an inclusive therapeutic approach as it can be tailored to individual needs (White, 2011). This was supported by teachers who perceived dance and movement therapy to meet individual needs, but in a group context (Devereaux, 2017). Other stakeholders perceived theatre arts programmes (Kehl, 2021) and rhythmic entertainment approaches (Orr et al., 1998) and art classrooms (Burdick, 2011) to be inclusive to autistic students, and CAEPs were defined as neurodiversity friendly spaces (Hogle, 2021). No autistic voices were, however, heard concerning their perception of CAEPs as inclusive; this is an evident gap which should be addressed by future research.

3.4.3. CAEP Outcomes

Alongside perceptions of CAEPs, this MMSR synthesised findings on the outcomes of CAEPs when they are used with autistic students in secondary school contexts. A schematic synthesis of CAEP outcomes can be seen in Figure 3.5.

Figure 3.5

A Schematic of CAEP outcomes



3.4.3.1. Extracted and Grouped Findings

Overall, three CAEP outcomes were only identified as findings in one, or a very small number, of included reports. The first identified that music therapy provided autistic students with end-products to be proud of (White, 2011), and the second that stakeholders perceived improved ability to self-regulate in their autistic students in the music classroom (Cardella, 2014). The third was that the arts provide career opportunities to autistic students (Burdick, 2011; Çevirgen et al., 2018). Some parents went as far as to say that the societal value attached to being a skilled artist were in direct opposition to the stigma that a label such as autism can have on students. This resulted in autistic students being thought of not in terms of their disability, but in terms of their identity as an artist; parents perceived this to be a valuable CAEP outcome (Burdick, 2011). No autistic voices were, however, heard to either support or object these suggestions.

3.4.3.2. Stakeholders Value and Enjoy CAEPs

Stakeholders valued CAEPs as an outcome of the participation of their autistic child or student. Teachers and parents positively perceived CAEPs (White, 2011), and attributed the positive changes that they saw in their autistic students to CAEP participation (Cardella, 2014). Parents and teachers also felt that the creative arts were important (Burdick, 2011), and mentioned that the arts were important to their autistic students too (Lindblom, 2017). This was supported by six parents and teachers from a school with a large creative arts therapy (CAT) provision, who valued CAT so much that they perceived there should be greater access to creative art therapists for *all* autistic students (White, 2011). Other educators also valued CAEPs and wished they were implemented more often (Devereaux, 2017). There is, however, not a large enough pool of data to suggest that all stakeholders share this view. Further, no autistic student voices were heard concerning the value of CAEPs.

Stakeholders also enjoyed CAEPs. For example, the arts were seen to be a pleasurable medium (Burdick, 2011); in an ethnographic case study of one autistic teenage girl, a parent perceived that music was an enjoyable medium for their autistic child: “it struck me that if there was no music in her life I could see her being a very different person, because she . . . gets very excited, she’s smiling, singing along when there’s music . . . if that wasn’t in her life it would be a huge gap in her and who she is” (Lindblom, 2017, p. 227). This was supported by the student herself, who noted that she could not go a day without music (Lindblom, 2017). Another autistic student similarly mentioned looking forward to their participation in art therapy; they expressed that art therapy made them happy, that they thought it was great, they were excited about art therapy, and that they wished art therapy lasted longer (Nevers-Ashton, 2023). This is the only outcome of CAEPs where more than one autistic voice was heard.

3.4.3.3. CAEP Participation Facilitates Socio-Emotional Development

Reports identified improvements in socio-emotional domains following CAEP participation. First, teachers and parents perceived that CAEPs enhanced their autistic students' social skills and improved their participation in social interactions. For example, six teachers perceived an increase in the quantity of their autistic students' social interactions over time, whilst taking part in group-based CAEPs; this was, however, not quantitatively tested (Kehl, 2021). Some teachers perceived a negative impact of their autistic students' improved social skills; they suggested that their autistic students' increased social skills resulted in their increased confidence to initiate conversations with peers, which was often at inappropriate times (Cardella, 2014).

CAEPs were also seen to facilitate communicative developments in autistic students. For example, one teacher/researcher (Burrows, 2017) found that art allowed autistic students

to continue their efforts to improve their communication, in line with their Individual Education Plan targets. A student was seen to gain confidence in asking or answering questions spontaneously, in front of other students, and expressing their interests to peers and teachers. The researcher suggested that these improvements were seen because the participant was able to design, make and wear a painted mask and gloves during CAEP participation, and could *hide behind* the mask when communicating and learning in a playful environment (Burrows, 2017).

Spontaneous (Müller et al., 2017), reciprocal and expressive (Kehl, 2021) communication was also seen to increase following CAEP participation, and the reports which found this generally focused on drama programmes. For example, in qualitative questionnaires, interviews and focus groups, parents and teachers suggested that autistic students were more skilled and willing to spontaneously initiate conversations with one of the 21 other autistic students participating in the drama programme following their participation (Müller et al., 2017). This finding was supported by parents, who perceived CAEPs to enhance their communication with their child (Çevirgen et al., 2018), as well as their child's communication with their siblings (Karnezi, 2008). For example, one parent noted that their autistic child would come home from school, following a one-to-one art intervention, excited to show and discuss the art that they created that day with their family (Çevirgen et al., 2018).

Drama-based interventions and programmes were also perceived to facilitate development in ToM. For example, Kempe and Tissot (2012) observed that one group of teaching staff perceived a ToM development in their autistic student following a task where they role-played as a new friend to a lonely, imaginary, student. Following the role play, participants were asked to write a diary entry from the imaginary characters' perspective. Teachers were impressed with one autistic student's ability to write in another persona; they noted that this was a new skill that is sometimes challenging for autistic students to obtain

and perceived the drama to have been helpful (Kempe & Tissot, 2012). Karnezi's (2008) tested four autistic students' ToM before and after participation in a 14 week long drama intervention. The intervention involved the use of four interactive fictional stories to assist the students in their development of an understanding of the mind. Researchers tested autistic students' ToM using five tests which were built into the interactive story (first order and second order false belief tests, appearance reality test, the deception task and the inhibitory control test). In the first cycle of the intervention, there were only six passes out of 20; in the final cycle, that increased to 15 out of 20 passes (Karnezi, 2008). This suggests the effectiveness of a drama intervention on development of ToM. However, there were only six participants across the two discussed studies, and no inclusion of autistic voices.

3.4.3.4. CAEP Participation Facilitates Personal Development

Autistic students were seen to develop personally through CAEP participation. For example, autistic students' confidence increased during CAEP participation. Parents (Çevirgen et al., 2018), educators and peers (Müller et al., 2017) noticed and reported that autistic students came out of their shell throughout their time participating in drama and art-based activities. Further, CAEP participation was seen to facilitate improved self-worth in autistic student participants, which subsequently led to improved self-esteem, according to interviews with autistic students and their parents (Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021).

Improvements were also perceived in autistic students' sense of responsibility (Smith et al., 2019), flexibility, self-advocacy (Müller et al., 2017), risk taking capabilities, expression of imagination (Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021), self-expression, and sensory development (Çevirgen et al., 2018). For example, six parents and teachers in a South African special provision school perceived music therapy to contribute to their autistic students' sensory development and improved sensory awareness (White, 2011).

3.4.3.5. CAEP Participation Facilitates Educational and Skills-Based Development

CAEPs were seen to facilitate educational development. First, it was identified that CAEPs assist with cognitive and language development. For example, autistic students were able to better engage with abstract ideas (Kempe & Tissot, 2012), and to provide high quality responses to questions more quickly (Karnezi, 2008). Concerning the latter, a drama intervention was designed to show four participants how it might feel to overcome their loneliness and fear of being bullied by joining a gang. Karnezi wanted to illustrate through drama that being on the side of the bullies does not make you better or stronger than the victims, rather, the gang members will also have insecurities that are hidden. Comparisons between baseline and post intervention scores demonstrated improvements in the quality of responses to questions about the subject matter; some improvements were seen across all four participants (Karnezi, 2008).

Further, CAEP participation improved participation in CAEPs themselves, and other school activities. For example, researchers observed autistic students being more actively engaged in drama activities following the first stages of a drama intervention (Kempe & Tissot, 2012; Müller et al., 2017). Additionally, school performance (Çevirgen et al., 2018), quantity of daily activities (Smith et al., 2019), spontaneous question asking (Burrows, 2017), and school motivation improved. CAEP participation also appeared to improve autistic students' on-task behaviour (Kong, 2023), and participation in class more generally (Nevers-Ashton, 2023).

3.4.3.6. Development of Physical and Motor Skills

CAEPs facilitated physical and motor development. For example, head jerking seemed to decrease following a music intervention with one autistic participant who displayed inconsistent levels of head jerking pre-intervention (Orr et al., 1998). Further, 10 autistic students, who were “healthy, without orthopedic or sensory problems and able to understand visual and verbal instructions” (Arzoglou et al., 2013; p. 564) at the onset of their participation, improved in gross/fine motor skills such as balance, overcoming obstacles and neuromuscular coordination following a dance intervention (Arzoglou et al., 2013). However, these findings come from a small pool of only 11 participants, and there is no representation of autistic voices.

3.4.3.7. Achieving Therapeutic Goals

Three findings were identified in this category. The first simply identified that music therapy allowed autistic students to achieve therapeutic goals (White, 2011). The second found through quantitative tests that a contingent music intervention (wherein music, which was enjoyed by the participant, was stopped contingent on off-task behaviour) improved therapeutic task performance compared to non-contingent (wherein music was played non-contingently; Gunter, 1993).

CAEPs were also seen to decrease the *severity of autistic symptoms*; participation reduced unsolicited vocalisations, mouthing, lip mouthing (Gunter, 1993) and screaming (Orr et al., 1998) behaviors in two autistic students, and appeared to help one autistic student to control their behaviour (Orr et al., 1998). A drama intervention saw a decrease in *target behaviour mannerisms* across all four secondary school aged autistic participants; three of the four participants showed a decrease in the severity of *autistic symptoms* during the

intervention, whilst one remained the same. Those whose *symptoms* decreased were, for example, also better able to control their impulse responses (Karnezi, 2008).

3.4.3.8. Generalisability and Transferability.

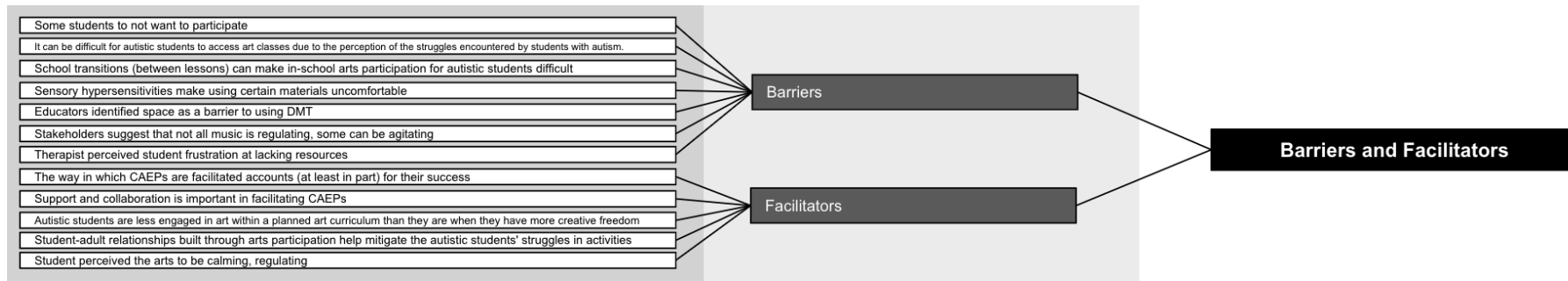
Though the aforementioned outcomes of CAEPs paint an undoubtedly positive picture, albeit often framed by a curative, pathology-focused ideology, the final category under “outcomes” explores “generalisability and transferability”. Extracted findings in this category were heterogeneous, with five suggesting that outcomes from CAEPs are generalisable and transferable across contexts and over time (Devereaux, 2017; Loyd, 2011; Müller et al., 2017; White, 2011), and three suggesting that they are not (Karnezi, 2008; Müller et al., 2017). No autistic voices were heard in this category.

3.4.4. Barriers and Facilitators

Although the nature of and outcomes associated with using CAEPs with autistic students in secondary schools painted an overwhelmingly positive picture, barriers to implementing CAEPs in this context were perceived by stakeholders (see Figure 3.6). The first barrier identified was that some autistic students did not want to participate in CAEPs. According to school staff, some autistic students were reluctant to actively contribute to discussion in drama activities (Kempe & Tissot, 2012), and according to an art therapist, one autistic student put up walls, refusing to talk to them (Nevers-Ashton, 2023). Access to art classes was also sometimes seen to be a barrier, due to the perception of struggles experienced by autistic students, such as sensory hypersensitivities and school-day transitions (Burdick, 2011). Finally, infrastructural barriers such as space and resources were seen to exist (Devereaux, 2017; Nevers-Ashton, 2023).

Figure 3.6

A Schematic of barriers and facilitators



The first facilitating factor was the way in which CAEPs were facilitated by practitioners or teachers, most strongly supported by Loyd's (2011) findings. Even though instruction in drama involves multiple steps and abstract components, which were not observed in other areas of the curriculum, autistic students were seen to follow instructions in drama activities better than in other activities in school. Perhaps a reason for this is that questioning in drama is more open, and encourages students to draw on their own ideas and think flexibly. Another reason could be that instructing-modelling involves the whole body and provides autistic students with opportunities to imitate and make their own interpretations (Loyd, 2011).

Support and collaboration were also seen to be important facilitating factors. Teachers ($n = 6$) perceived the importance of community support in theatre arts programmes and wished for more collaboration with parents, or noted that they were not great at collaborating with the parents of their autistic students (Kehl, 2021). Students similarly perceived the arts to be calming and regulating, which was seen to be another facilitating factor. Further, there was a perception that student–adult relationships, that have been built through arts participation, can mitigate autistic students' struggles in art activities (Burdick, 2011).

3.5. Discussion

Four integrated findings were identified in response to the research questions of this systematic review, which were presented objectively in *Section 3.4. Integrated Findings*. This discussion will contextualise the integrated findings within a neurodiversity affirmative paradigm, before considering the quality appraisal and positivity biases of the included reports and identifying gaps in research and recommendations for future research.

3.5.1. Paradigmatic Approach

Previous reports at the intersection of research on autism and CAEPs which make up this MMSR were generally aligned with a corrective, pathology-focused framing of autism. This is evidenced by the lacking autistic voice, as well as the framing of autism in the included reports.

3.5.1.1. Lacking Autistic Voice

This MMSR demonstrated that there is severely limited representation of autistic voices in research at the intersection of autism and CAEPs. Though autistic students made up the

largest participant group ($n = 143$), only 24 autistic voices were truly heard in the sense that their views were proactively collected and reported.

First, 62 autistic students participated in quantitative non-randomised studies, wherein researchers observed their participation in and outcomes of a creative arts-based intervention or therapy. No autistic voices were heard across these six studies; rather, researchers perceived meaning from their responses to interventions or therapies. That is, research was conducted “*on*” rather than “*with*” them. Next, 57 autistic participants were identified across 12 studies within which only the voices of the researcher, or key adults in the autistic students' life, were heard. Four studies (Cardella, 2014; Devereaux, 2017; Kehl, 2021; White, 2011) did not collect data from students but from key adults, which though valuable, may not have authentically captured the voices of the target group. Only five studies (Çevirgen et al., 2018; Lindblom, 2017; Loyd, 2011; Nevers-Ashton, 2023) reported on the perceptions of autistic students. That is, out of 143 autistic student participants across the included report, only 24 autistic voices were heard.

The perceptions of autistic students still painted a positive picture of CAEPs. Nevers-Ashton's (2023) one participant (who was only quoted twice) noted that he liked art therapy and did not want to go back to class. Similarly, though only quoted once, one student noted that she could not go a day without music (Lindblom, 2017). Çevirgen, Aktaş and Koti's (2018) single participant briefly noted that visual arts lessons were their favourite, and that they were happier and calmer when painting. Across these three studies, this was the extent to which autistic voices were heard.

In Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio (2021), 11 autistic voices were heard. Autistic student participants perceived that theatrical improvisation helped them express themselves and their inner worlds and they also perceived it to be safe, free and fun. The remaining 10 autistic voices were heard in Loyd's (2011) research. Autistic students were interviewed

using an inclusive talking mats approach and the analysis was multi-modal, considering students' speech, body language and image selection. This study was the most inclusive of autistic voices across the MMSR. However, analysis combined student interview data with that of teachers. Therefore, it would be challenging to confirm whether or not the positive maintenance, development and generalisation of perspective taking in drama activities was perceived by the autistic students themselves. In a sample interview transcript, however, one student was quoted noting that they enjoyed drama at school (Loyd, 2011).

In sum, it cannot be said that autistic students support the perceptions of CAEP discussed in this MMSR as they had limited opportunity to contribute to the discussion; this systematic epistemic exclusion of autistic voices resulted in epistemic authority remaining with non-autistic stakeholders and researchers (Shaw et al., 2024). The only major contribution of autistic student participants was that they enjoyed their CAEP participation. Therefore, there is a clear need for the inclusion of more autistic voices in research at the intersection of autism and CAEPs to understand their perceptions more holistically and to resolve the existing epistemic injustice (Shaw et al., 2024).

3.5.1.2. Corrective and pathology-focused ideology

Alongside lacking autistic voices, stakeholders' perceptions of autism were generally aligned with a corrective, pathology-focused framing of autism. For example, social developments, such as improvements in social skills (e.g., Müller et al., 2017) and improved theory of mind (e.g., Karnezi, 2008), were considered to be beneficial outcomes of CAEPs. However, the way these outcomes were measured placed non-autistic standards as the goal (Robinson & Crane, 2025), and demonstrated a pathology-focused perception of autism, in line with the diagnostic criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013a). The author of one of the

included reports even noted that a neurotypical lens informed their methodology, data collection tools and analysis techniques (Burrows, 2017).

Application of this lens raises questions concerning the reliability and validity of findings in this MMSR. Müller, Nutting and Keddell (2017) reported on outcomes from a drama programme by looking at feedback from session facilitators and parents. Participants reflected on developments in autistic participants' empathy and concern for others; as time passed, friendships blossomed and autistic participants were seen to express improved concern for others by cheering peers on or comforting someone who was sad. This finding was perhaps true to the participants' experience as parents and facilitators. However, it was also grounded in a corrective ideology as stakeholders had measured the autistic participants' social functioning against non-autistic standards (Robinson & Crane, 2025) rather than embracing autistic social functioning in the way that it was presented. This corrective ideological framing of autism makes an autistic persons' socio- communicative differences an *autistic* problem, rather than a mutual one as suggested by the double empathy problem (Milton et al., 2023).

Considering this, perhaps neurodiversity affirmative findings would be better aligned with autistic students' experiences, thus allowing researchers and practitioners to take a community-informed approach when moving forward. Therefore, applying a neurodiversity affirmative lens to empirical research at the intersection of autism and CAEPs could be a beneficial next step.

3.5.2. *Quality Appraisal (QA)*

The scores from the included studies' QA assessments indicated a potential need for more rigorous and higher quality research at the intersection of CAEPs and autism. However, rather than poor methodological rigour, reporting of findings which were not well-aligned

with the MMAT criteria (Hong et al., 2018) appeared to be the reason why the MMSR's overall QA was so low. For example, the only reason that nine reports scored poorly was that their research questions were either unclear or lacking, which led to a "N" or "U" response to four of the QA questions, which address the relevance of research design to the research questions. In another example, one report (Nevers-Ashton, 2023), scored 0 at QA as it was a practice paper rather than an empirical paper for which MMAT is tailored to. That is, this report was a professional therapist's discussion of one of their patients' experiences and therapeutic outcomes, which while valuable to the MMSR, was not written in a way conducive to scoring highly at QA. So, an approach to QA which is more inclusive to non-academic empirical research (i.e., practice papers) may be a valuable next step in assessing the quality of research in the field.

The MMAT was useful in this review because its clear and structured criteria allowed methodological quality to be assessed consistently across studies with different research designs. This made it easier to compare quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies and to identify common issues such as unclear research questions or poor alignment between research questions and study design. However, the MMAT does not assess whether the autism research adopts appropriate paradigmatic approaches, in-line with community preferences, or the extent to which autistic individuals or communities are involved in shaping the research. These dimensions of research quality are increasingly recognised as important indicators of responsible and inclusive autism research (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019), but fall outside the scope of the MMAT's evaluation criteria.

Evidence of corrective, pathology-focused paradigmatic approaches to autism research was a key concern in this MMSR. Perhaps, then, there would be value in the development of a QA tool which addresses these concerns by scoring reports based on the suitability of their paradigmatic approach and their involvement of the community of interest

in their research process, particularly as no such tool was identified despite the prevalence of pathology-focused approaches in the literature.

3.5.3. Positivity Bias

Quality appraisal notwithstanding, limitations to the reports included in this MMSR were identified. As well as the lack of autistic voices and evident corrective, pathology-focused framing of autism, there was a substantial positivity bias in the included reports. In fact, in line with previous systematic review findings, only one negative perception of using CAEPs with autistic secondary school students was identified: a risk of dysregulation. Previous studies have similarly found overstimulation to be the only associated risk (Doyle, 2021; Doyle & Kim, 2025).

However, this MMSR did not identify any reasons within the included studies as to *why* negative perceptions were lacking. Tight (2023) provides an overview of suggestions, including “literature, sample or selection, response, rater, methodological or theoretical, and publication or reporting bias” (p. 207). This suggestion is novel and important, as all biases in research can lead to the misrepresentation of results and findings (Dawson & Dawson, 2018). Specifically, positivity bias, as defined by Tight (2023), is evident in many of the reports included in this MMSR. For example, Müller, Nutting and Keddell (2017) report on the possibility of methodological bias in their questioning: “leading questions in the interview and survey protocols may have unintentionally biased stakeholders’ responses” (p. 69). Similarly, Cardella (2014) identified sample or selection bias as a limitation to their report within which parents and teachers took part in interviews about a music programme. The author noted that it is, perhaps, human nature “for a parent to perceive his or her child in a more favorable light” (p. 118), and reported that, because parents recommended teacher participants to the researcher, they may have included only the teachers with the most

positive view of the autistic student(s) that they discussed (Cardella, 2014).

Whilst this discussion provides only a small number of examples, limitations to other included reports exist, such as small sample sizes (e.g., Loyd, 2011), homogeneous samples (e.g., Devereaux, 2017), inconsistent observations (e.g., Burdick, 2011), and lacking comparison groups and blinding (e.g., Smith et al., 2019), which could have resulted in a positivity bias. Further, six reports (Arzoglou et al., 2013; 2018; Gunter, 1993; Kempe & Tissot, 2012; Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021; Nevers-Ashton, 2023) did not identify any limitations of their studies. This is, in itself, a positivity bias, as previously identified limitations such as a small sample size and lacking autistic voice are evident across all of the included studies.

Considering these issues, there is a need for research into CAEPs to explicitly focus on potential risks associated with autistic students participating in CAEPs; the perceptions of autistic students on the risks associated with CAEPs would be particularly valuable. Data should also be collected to transparently report on the possibility of sample, selection, response, rater, methodological, theoretical, publication, and reporting bias.

3.5.4. Gaps in Research and Recommendations

Based on this discussion, four gaps in research and recommendations for future research remain. First, more neurodiversity affirmative research is needed at the intersection of research on autism and CAEPs. There is particularly a need to ensure that the voices of autistic students themselves are heard on matters that could impact them; for example, on how autistic young people perceive CAEPs. Next, further research should explore the perceptions of stakeholders, including researchers, study participants such as teachers, and autistic students, on autism. For example, what are educational stakeholders' perceptions of autism? Do educational stakeholders hold corrective and pathology-focused perceptions of

autism, or does the researchers' paradigmatic framework simply make it appear that way? There is also a potential need for updated means of quality appraisal (QA). In such a field where paradigmatic approaches are of utmost importance, and where practice papers and other alternative means of publication are included in MMSRs, current QA approaches appear unsuitable for truly assessing the quality of the included literature. Finally, research should address the positivity bias evident at the intersection of research on CAEPs and autism, for example, on what stakeholders perceive to be the risks associated with CAEPs when used with autistic secondary school students.

3.6. Conclusion

Objectively, the findings of this review would suggest that CAEPs have been very successful when used with autistic students in secondary education. Limitations must, though, be borne in mind. First, the included reports were generally aligned with a corrective and pathology-focused ideology. Therefore, it is hard to ascertain whether identified benefits actually avail autistic secondary school students. Second, the included reports were ill-aligned with the MMAT; therefore, the quality of research in the field remains uncertain. Finally, there is an evident positivity bias, resulting in a need for research to consider the negatives of CAEPs, and the risks associated with CAEPs too.

Based on these limitations, we cannot confidently answer the research question: how successfully have the creative arts been used with autistic students in secondary education? Although findings of this review would suggest that CAEPs have been very successful in this context, there are too many unknowns to reliably answer this question. However, our suggestions of further research are, perhaps, a good place to start.

4. “Although building students' skills for cooperation and contribution are the most important for future success in life, we often have to teach content at the expense of these skills”: Teachers’ perceptions of teaching autistic students using creative arts-based pedagogy in the mainstream secondary classroom.

4.1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a core goal that has been defined by the United Nations as being central to developing a fair society (United Nations, 2019). More specifically, inclusive education is of current interest to the Department for Education (DfE) in England. In 2025, the DfE outlined a need for more evidence-informed research to deepen their understanding of what teaching approaches work with students who have “different types of Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND)” in mainstream education (Department for Education, 2025, p. 16).

4.1.1. Autism and creative arts-based pedagogy

Amongst other approaches, creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP) has been suggested by researchers and educational stakeholders as one potentially effective approach for inclusive education when working with autistic mainstream secondary school students (i.e., Doyle & Kim, 2025). CABP is defined as the use of the creative arts (i.e., drama, dance, music, art and creative language) to enhance teaching and learning; it is a social constructivist, interactive, collaborative, and multimodal pedagogy wherein CABP practitioners focus on process over outcome (Eisner, 2002). CABP provides space for learners to actively and socially engage in their knowledge construction (Abedin, 2011). An example of CABP, in the form of a drama

technique called “hot seating”, can be seen in Andrews et al., (2021). Kumar et al. (2022) provide a second example, discussing teaching the alphabet rhythmically and in tune to one of the popular ABC songs.

Many reportedly advantageous outcomes of using CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school students have been discussed within the literature, such as enjoyment (e.g., Kempe & Tissot, 2012), but also socio-emotional (e.g., Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019), personal (e.g., Çevirgen et al., 2018), educational (e.g., Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021) and skills-based (e.g., Çevirgen et al., 2018) development. For example, CABP activities, which promote collective creativity and silliness, have been reported to improve autistic mainstream secondary school students’ social interactions (Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021) and their ability to engage in conversations or class discussions (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019; Drapete, 2017). Literature also suggests that CABP provides a safe space for autistic mainstream secondary school students, and accounts its benefits to this. For example, when teachers use CABP, autistic mainstream secondary school students have reportedly felt comfortable, confident and safe enough to form bonds with one another, or to feel part of a community (Kehl, 2021). This is supported by Lee et al., (2024) who reported that the CABP environment was safe, effective and supportive for their autistic adolescent participants.

Considering these reported benefits of using CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school students, practitioners may feel inclined to work towards CABP implementation with this cohort. However, there are limitations to the existing evidence base. First, it could be said that the reporting at this intersection of research has historically been grounded in a corrective ideological framing of autism (Robinson & Crane, 2025). By suggesting that the development of autistic social skills, for example, is an advantageous outcome of being taught using CABP, stakeholders and researchers perhaps demonstrate their alignment with a medical framing of autism (Hobson et al., 2023), which places non-autistic

standards as the goal (Robinson & Crane, 2025). This framing has been criticised by the autistic community (Shaw et al., 2024), yet remains evident across the data at this intersection of research (Doyle, Kim & Asbury, 2025).

Alongside this, there is limited discussion of any potential risks associated with using CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school students in existing literature. The only risk currently identified is of overstimulation (Doyle & Kim, 2025). Due to the limited evidence available, it is likely that there could be further risks associated with using CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school students which have not yet been identified.

Doyle, Kim and Asbury (2025) suggest that the poor identification of risks associated with creative arts-based educational practices such as CABP is due to the presence of a positivity bias in the field, which can skew findings to look more positive than they are in reality (Tight, 2023). Such a bias could be a result of poor methodological quality in the research; Doyle, Kim and Asbury (2025) noted that reports often showed a positivity bias and also reported sample or selection bias (Cardella, 2014) or the use of leading questions (Müller, Nutting & Keddell, 2017) in their limitations.

4.1.2. Teachers' voices

The voices of teachers are also particularly sparse in research at this intersection. We are only aware of one paper (Kehl, 2021) that has explicitly considered the perceptions of mainstream secondary school teachers on using CABP with their autistic students. This study found that teachers perceive CABP to afford autistic students with an inclusive, authentic, safe space wherein they can learn from their non-autistic peers and teachers. The opportunities for communication afforded by CABP were perceived to allow for autistic students' development in social functioning, including expressive and reciprocal communication and friendships, and to increase autistic students' resilience (Kehl, 2021). Teachers also identified

a risk of their autistic students experiencing overstimulation in CABP participation (Kehl, 2021). It could be said that these teachers' perceptions of using CABP with autistic students, whilst perhaps true to their experience, are similarly grounded in a corrective ideological framing of autism. However, with only six participants in this study it is clear that further research is needed.

Considering that a teacher's understanding of, and respect for, autistic students' experiences in the classroom are the foundation of inclusive and non-discriminatory pedagogical approaches (Conn, 2018), perhaps understanding teachers' perceptions of CABP, and the barriers and facilitators that exist when working towards CABP implementation, would be a useful next step in understanding this phenomenon.

4.1.3. Problem statement

The issues arising from this literature review are threefold. First, findings at this intersection of research are mostly grounded in a corrective ideological framing of autism (Robinson & Crane, 2025). Next, although benefits of using CABP with autistic students have been identified, including the suggestion that it offers a "safe space" to autistic mainstream secondary school students, there is a positivity bias evident. This bias has resulted in minimal discussion of the potential risks of using CABP to teach autistic students in mainstream secondary schools. Finally, there is limited research exploring teachers' perceptions of using CABP in this context. Therefore, this study aims to collect the perceptions of teachers on the benefits *and* risks of using CABP, as well as their perceptions of what the barriers and facilitators are to using CABP with autistic young people in mainstream secondary schools. To achieve this, we asked the following research questions: (1) How do teachers in mainstream secondary schools perceive CABP in the context of teaching autistic students?

(2) What do teachers in secondary mainstream schools report as barriers and facilitators to using CABP with autistic students?

4.2. Methods

4.2.1. Neurodiversity Paradigm

This qualitative questionnaire study was conducted within a neurodiversity paradigm. Seeking the perspectives of, and meaningfully involving autistic individuals in research are two high priority considerations in embodying a neurodiversity paradigm (Shaw et al., 2024). Therefore, the researchers were committed to conducting research “by” and “with” the community, rather than “for” or “on” them (van Schaik, 2021). A co-production methodology was used in the design, data collection and dissemination stages of this study. A paid autistic individual acted as a collaborator in the knowledge production process (Albert et al., 2023; Bottomley et al., 2024; Pettican et al., 2023) at numerous stages throughout the process, from design to dissemination. Alongside this, identity first language, recommended for use by autistic individuals in England (Dwyer, 2022b), and other anti-ableist language has been used in all documentation (Hartman et al., 2023).

4.2.2. Positionality Statement

The first author has worked in mainstream classrooms supporting neurodivergent students, and as an applied theatre practitioner with a range of community groups. Alongside this, she has experience working closely alongside the senior leadership team of a large, mainstream secondary school; this provided her with an intimate understanding of both the ways in which the creative arts can be used with neurodivergent students across educational contexts, and of the inner workings of the public educational system in England. This dual experience situates the first author’s priorities between the needs of autistic students and the operational realities

of schools, and it was clear that this was likely to impact her inductive analysis. Therefore, two steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings: (1) a paid autistic co-producer was hired to act as a collaborator in the knowledge production process to ensure the voices of autistic individuals were at the centre of the research, and (2) the second author reviewed and offered feedback on data collection tools, transcripts, codes and themes at every stage of research design, data collection and data analysis.

4.2.3. Participants

Participants were teachers, at any stage in their career, who held qualified teacher status (QTS) and were teaching in a mainstream secondary school in England at the time of data collection (see *Demographic Data* for a detailed overview). The researcher recruited 58 teachers via online snowball sampling, through social media, advocacy groups and online forums.

4.2.4. Data Collection

An online questionnaire was presented to teachers in Qualtrics; it predominantly consisted of items requiring open text responses (see supplementary Table 1). Participants were asked questions about how often they have used CABP in the past (i.e., to the extent that you are aware, how often do you think you have taught, or do you think you teach autistic students using creative art-based pedagogy?), about their perceived positives and negatives of CABP (i.e., what do you perceive to be the positives and negatives of creative art-based pedagogy in the context of teaching autistic students in a mainstream school?), perceived barriers and facilitators (i.e., is there anything that helps / might help or gets / might get in the way of you using creative arts-based pedagogy with autistic students in your practice?) and future CABP use (i.e., how likely are you to use creative arts-based pedagogy with autistic students in your

practice?). As participants were unable to seek clarification from the researcher, neurodiversity affirmative steps to minimise question misinterpretation were taken (Loyd, 2011), including a pilot study and co-producer consultation. The questionnaire was open for three months (October to December, 2024); once closed, 58 questionnaire responses were exported to a google spreadsheet for analysis.

4.2.5. Data Analysis

Data were analysed through an exploratory, inductive content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016). The first author independently engaged in the first stage of analysis, decontextualisation, by undertaking an open inductive coding process on the first 50% (29) of questionnaire responses. An initial code-book of 77 codes (see supplementary Table 2) was developed. The first author then consulted with the second author before the process of recontextualisation took place; the first author re-read and coded the initial 50% of responses, alongside the remainder, developing a code-book of 56 codes (see supplementary Table 3). Codes were categorised by clustering (Asbury et al., 2021). The first cycle of categorisation resulted in 17 categories (see supplementary Table 4). The first author consulted with the second author after the first cycle of categorisation and a decision was made to further analyse and reduce the number of categories; an additional cycle of categorization can be seen in supplementary Table 5, and the final categorization can be seen in supplementary Table 6.

4.3. Results

4.3.1. Demographic Data

Closely aligned with the balance evident in the teacher workforce (F = 76%; M = 24%) as outlined by the Department for Education (2024), 72.4% of the participants of this study were female. Ages ranged between 23 and 59 (*median* = 35) and the majority (60.3%) of

participants were practising teaching in the northern regions of England (remainder: 20.7% London and the South; 12.1% Midlands; 6.9% East Anglia). Participants had been teaching for between 1 and 33 years (*median* = 9.5) and when asked whether they taught Key Stage 3 (KS3; ages 11-14), KS4 (ages 14-16), KS5 (ages 16-18), or a combination, 53.4% of participants stated that they taught all key stages (remainder: 22.4% KS3 only; 3.4% KS4 only; 3.4% KS5 only; 13.8% KS3 and KS4; 3.4% KS4 and KS5). Almost half (41.4%) of the teachers who participated taught science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects, followed by the creative arts (including the creative arts combined with English; 19%), English (17.2%) and Humanities and social sciences (17.2%). The small number of participants remaining (5.1%) taught languages or business studies. Autistic teachers made up 12.07% of the participant pool. See table 4.1 for an overview of the demographic data.

Table 4.1

Demographic Data

Category	N=
Gender	
Female	42
Male	16
Age	
18-25	5
26-30	15
31-40	17
41-50	11
51-60	10
60+	0
Region of Occupancy	
East Anglia	4
London & the South	12
The Midlands	7
The North	14

Yorkshire & the Humber	21
Years of Service	
0-5	19
6-10	13
11-15	9
16-20	6
21+	11
Key Stage Taught	
KS3	13
KS4	2
KS5	2
KS3 & KS4	8
KS4 & KS5	2
All	31
Subject Taught	
Business	1
Creative Arts (& Arts combined with English)	11
English Only	10
Humanities & Social Sciences	10
Languages	2
STEM	24
Autistic?	
Yes	7
No	51

In terms of experience with autistic students, 51.7% of participants said they had worked with many autistic students throughout their career, and 32.8% said they had worked with only a few. Only 13.8% of teachers said that they had worked with “not very many” autistic students and one participant had worked with “none”. When asked about their professional experience of autism, 62% of participants noted that teaching autistic students was their only experience; 5.2% described providing pastoral support, and 5.2% noted undertaking autism-related training. In their personal lives, 11% of participants had taken on independently led training or reading about autism. Further, 20.1% of participants had autistic family members and, as previously noted, 12.1% were autistic themselves.

4.3.2. Participants' use of CABP

Frequent use of CABP was reported by 25.9% of participants; 34.5% said they use it sometimes, and 29.3% used it infrequently. Only three participants (6.9%) reported never using CABP, whilst one participant each selected “always” or “unsure”. Of those who did not use CABP, their reasons included that they “haven't really come across this concept before” (P12) or that they were “not sure how to do it in Maths” (P38). Most of the provided examples of CABP use were, however, in STEM subjects. STEM teachers reported using art-based techniques such as “creating storyboards about scientific processes” (P33) and music-based techniques such as “using a song to remember formulae and names of shapes” (P18). Additionally, STEM teachers reported using drama techniques such as “learning about the structure and properties of the states of matter through role play” (P32) or “role playing in the kitchen, [to] carry out a dry run of practicals” (P28).

Examples in other subjects were also provided. Examples of drama-based techniques included “hot seating” (P2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 24), wherein students act as a chosen, usually famous or literary, individual, and are asked questions by their peers to explore that individual's thoughts, ideologies and intricacies (Andrews et al., 2021). P5 also described using forum theatre (wherein “spectators” have the opportunity to change what happened in a scene or performance to see what that does to the outcome) and conscious alley (wherein dilemmas are analysed and explored as the character walks down an “alleyway” and are given opposing advice) “for character and relationship understanding” (P5). In languages, “particular songs [helped] students learn the alphabet, numbers and weather in French and Spanish” (P34). Other music-based examples included asking students to “create a rap to help with revision information” (P3) or “learning songs for geographical processes” (P16). One teacher described an arts-based technique used in a sociology lesson: [I] “ask students to draw a

family that would be favoured by a new right perspective, or a family of someone favoured by a functionalist. In crime, [I ask:] who would look like a typical criminal, victim etc” (P36).

4.3.3. Categories identified through inductive content analysis

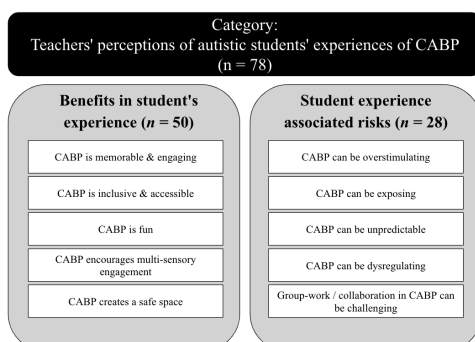
Data were organised into three categories: (1) teachers' perceptions of autistic students' experiences of CABP; (2) teachers' perceptions of the role of CABP in the personal development of autistic students; (3) teacher-identified barriers & facilitators to using CABP with autistic students in a mainstream secondary school context. Within these categories, six subcategories and 38 codes were identified. Supplementary Table 6 illustrates the frequency of each code, and category maps are provided in Figures 4.1 to 4.3.

4.3.3.1. Category 1: Teachers' perceptions of autistic students' experiences of CABP

Teachers perceived both risks and benefits to autistic students of using CABP (see Figure 4.1). Some of the identified risks and benefits are aligned with a corrective ideological framing of autism (Robinson & Crane, 2025) which is not aligned with the neurodiversity affirmative paradigmatic framing of this study. This will be explored in more depth in the *Discussion*.

Figure 4.1

Codes for Category 1: Teachers' perceptions of autistic students' experiences of CABP



4.3.3.1.1. Perceived benefits to students

The most commonly perceived benefit of CABP was its memorable and engaging nature ($n = 18$); this was seen to be a benefit for all students, not only autistic students, as it allows for “[m]ore noteworthy lessons where students better remember and engage” (P6). Teachers identified reasons why they believed CABP to be memorable and engaging, such as: “pattern and repetition of words and movements combined helps them to remember” (P34) or “interactive, hands-on learning experiences [...] captivate students' interests” (P39). Further, P7 suggested that the engaging and memorable nature of CABP could be beneficial, sometimes, “a different and "left field" approach is exactly the thing that clicks and hooks [autistic students] in”.

Teachers ($n = 11$) also perceived CABP to be inclusive and accessible; they perceived CABP to make “material accessible without obvious and belittling differentiation” (P24) and to allow autistic students “to access parts of the curriculum that otherwise they wouldn't be able to” (P4). The teacher who said this did not suggest that the curriculum was inaccessible to all autistic students but they did believe that CABP enhanced autistic students' access.

Teachers ($n = 9$) also perceived CABP to be fun, and noted that “if the students are enjoying themselves, they will find learning easier” (P20). This was supported by teachers who believed that enjoyment of lessons equated to stronger educational outcomes (P14, 44). Autistic students and teachers alike were understood to enjoy artistic participation, and a potential reason for this was perceived to be CABP's multi-sensory, active and reactive nature; eight teachers suggested that this was the case. CABP was similarly perceived by participants to allow for “engagement on a sensory level” (P31) by teachers, who noted that “art activities involve touch, sight, and sometimes sound, which can be especially beneficial

for students who have sensory sensitivities” (P49). Calm music (P33), less writing (P42) and active participation (P32) were also seen to be benefits of CABP.

Finally, four participants perceived that CABP created a safe and controlled environment for autistic students to learn in. P5 noted that a “lack of social cues can be problematic in the group work approaches but I think it allows an exploration of alternative perspectives in a safe and controlled environment”. This was supported by P2, who suggested that CABP can provide “a safe way of engaging with the feelings and thoughts of other people”.

4.3.3.1.2. Perceived risks of using CABP with autistic students

Teachers ($n = 28$) perceived risks in the use of CABP with autistic students in mainstream schools. First, eight teachers felt that their autistic “students [...] struggle with overstimulation” (P22) during CABP participation, because there is a “risk of sensory overload from various textures, colours, and noises involved in art activities” (P39). This was supported by other participants who noted that “the noise of a creative based classroom can be over stimulating for some autistic students” and suggested that CABP can be “hard to manage, many students can find drama type art work overwhelming” (P5).

Teachers ($n = 5$) also described how CABP could be exposing for their autistic students; for example, “Many of the autistic students [...] who I have taught in the past have stated that they are uncomfortable with activities that might place them in a situation where they have to verbalise what they think and feel” (P42). Teachers noted that due to the exposing nature of CABP, autistic students “may be reluctant to get involved or to join in publicly in class” (P26).

CABP was also perceived by five teachers to be unpredictable for their autistic students. Teachers recognised that “if a creative lesson is not something you do regularly it

can upset established routines and it can have a level of unpredictability about outcomes that can be upsetting for some students” (P2). This was supported by other teachers who similarly perceived a change in routine or change to the “norm” to be an environmental challenge for their autistic students (P42). Similarly, the CABP environment was considered to be dysregulating by three teacher respondents. For example, one suggested that “the [CABP] environment at times can cause students to become unregulated” (P22).

Finally, seven teachers expressed concern that the group work and collaboration required in CABP could be challenging for their autistic students. P5 noted: “some autistic students also throw themselves into it but don’t have the awareness of social context and so can say inappropriate things or get into a situation where other students mock them”. This was seen to be particularly difficult for those who “have previously had friendship issues” (P6).

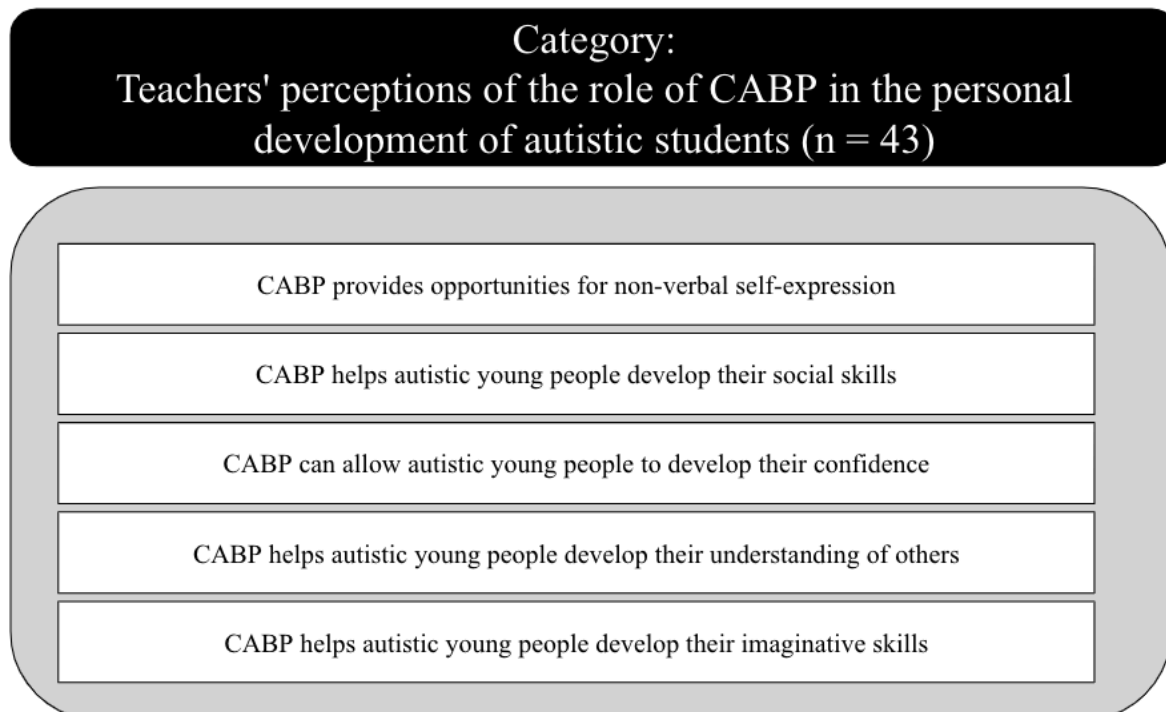
4.3.3.2. Category 2: Teachers' perceptions of the role of CABP in the personal development of autistic students

Teachers perceived CABP to assist in the personal development of autistic students in five ways: (1) CABP provides opportunities for non-verbal self-expression; (2) CABP helps autistic young people develop their social skills; (3) CABP can allow autistic young people to develop their confidence; (4) CABP helps autistic young people develop their understanding of others; (5) CABP helps autistic young people develop their imaginative skills (see Figure 4.2). Some of the identified personal developments afforded to CABP participation are aligned with a corrective ideological framing of autism (Robinson & Crane, 2025) which is not aligned with the neurodiversity affirmative paradigmatic framing of this study. This will be discussed in more depth in the *Discussion*.

Teachers ($n = 15$) felt as though CABP provided “autistic students with a nonverbal expression and help[ed] them release their feelings and thoughts” (P57). Additionally, for those students with communication difficulties, P56 understood that it could be “difficult for them to accurately express their thoughts and feelings in traditional verbal ways. Through art forms such as painting, music, and dance, they can express their emotions and show their inner worlds”. Further, if their autistic students were struggling, P36 perceived that CABP “enables the teacher to see that they are struggling without them having to verbalise the issue”.

Figure 4.2

Codes for Category 2: Teachers’ perceptions of the role of CABP in the personal development of autistic students



CABP was also perceived to assist in the development of autistic students’ social skills by 13 participants; for example, P43 said that “through art activities, autistic students

can participate in creative work with other students, which helps them learn social skills and teamwork”. Another teacher noted that “art-based activities can foster social interaction and collaboration, helping autistic students build social skills in a supportive environment” (P39). These comments were supported by P47 who perceived CABP to “bridge the gap between autistic students and their neurotypical peers. When all students participate in art activities, it can promote understanding and acceptance”. Social development was the most common personal development code, perhaps as a number of teachers identified that “social barriers are one of the main challenges [autistic students] face” (P50).

Teachers ($n = 6$) also perceived CABP to “enhance [their autistic students’] self-confidence” (P57). P47 suggested that CABP “helps build self-esteem. When students create art, they can take pride in their accomplishments and see their own unique abilities”. P44 added that “they will gain a sense of accomplishment, thus enhancing their self-confidence and being more willing to take the initiative to learn and explore”.

Alongside this, six participants perceived CABP to allow autistic students “to consider the world from different perspectives and consider a variety of approaches to circumstances” (P17); “it encourages them to think in different ways, whilst still allowing them to focus on their own way of understanding things” (P7). These opportunities, provided by CABP, for autistic students to engage with and develop their understanding of the feelings and thoughts of others make up the fourth personal development code: CABP helps autistic young people develop their understanding of others.

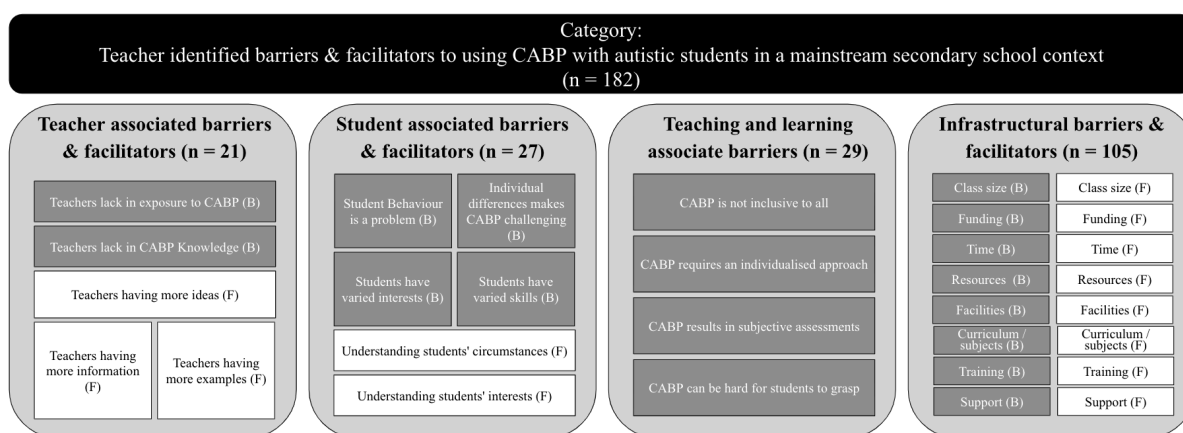
Finally, CABP was perceived to assist in the development of autistic individuals’ imaginative skills by three participants. P47 perceived that CABP could “foster creativity and imagination, allowing students to explore different ideas and perspectives”. This was supported by two other teachers (P50, 58) who noted that CABP cultivates and promotes creativity and imagination in their autistic students.

4.3.3.3. Category 3: Teacher identified barriers & facilitators to using CABP with autistic students in a mainstream secondary school context.

Teachers perceived teacher-associated, student-associated, teaching- and learning-associated and infrastructural barriers and facilitators to using CABP with autistic students in a mainstream secondary school context (see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3

Codes for Category 3: Teachers identified barriers and facilitators to using CABP with autistic students in a mainstream secondary school context



4.3.3.3.1. Teacher-associated barriers and facilitators

Teacher-associated barriers to using CABP with autistic students, from the perspective of 21 teachers, included a lack of knowledge and exposure to CABP ($n = 10$). One teacher noted that they “haven't really come across this concept before” (P12), and that they don't have a great deal of “knowledge of what activities there are” (P23) and another that they “have no experience of this and would be very nervous about knowing where to start” (P14).

Therefore, facilitating factors were seen to be the “sharing of ideas” (P8), information and examples, particularly in “STEM subjects which are not inherently geared to creative arts” (P21). It is, perhaps, valuable to reiterate here that STEM teachers make up nearly half of the

participant pool (41.4%). Teachers would like to be “provided with concrete examples [, to] not have to think of ideas” (P23) themselves, and to see “data and evidence of how this supports and encourages” autistic students (P12).

4.3.3.3.2. Student-associated barriers and facilitators

Student-associated barriers to using CABP with autistic students, from the perspective of 27 teachers, included behaviour, interests, skills and individual differences. “General classroom behaviour” (P10) was a large concern for 10 participants; P37 described the issue:

“Behaviour issues (not necessarily with autistic students but with others in the room) make it difficult to adapt to the needs of the autistic students[,] which may be greater during a more creative task, especially the first few times it is done where they may need extra support in navigating the expectations of the task and the change in routine/ lesson structure”. This was supported by others who note that “Students' uncooperative [behaviour] is the biggest obstacle” (P55).

Teachers ($n = 4$) also perceived that “some students may be completely uninterested in art, which will increase the difficulty of teaching” (P56). Additionally, varied creative art-based skills were seen to be a barrier by four teachers; “differences in artistic skills among students may cause some students to feel defeated or not understood” (P43). Finally, the extent to which differentiation would be required was a perceived barrier for three participants: “autistic students [...] may have unique difficulties in perception, understanding and expression, which makes it challenging to design creative art activities suitable for each student because their special needs and ability level should be fully considered, otherwise the expected teaching effect may not be achieved” (P44).

Understanding autistic students' interests and circumstances was seen to facilitate use by six teachers, two of which noted the value in understanding “the student's family

background” (P53) and “their unique personalities and needs” (P9) in facilitating CABP implementation and use. Alongside this, “understanding the [autistic students’] interests” (P54) was seen to be valuable. Four teachers made suggestions, such as: “Before starting teaching, spend time understanding the interests and hobbies of each autistic student. Some students may be particularly interested in painting, while others may prefer music or dance. By understanding their preferences, personalised art teaching activities can be better designed to improve students' participation and enthusiasm” (P56).

4.3.3.3. Teaching- and learning-associated barriers

Teaching- and learning-associated barriers to using CABP with autistic students in mainstream secondary schools, from the perspective of 29 participants, were (1) CABP is not inclusive to all; (2) CABP requires an individualised approach; (3) CABP results in subjective assessments; and (4) CABP can be hard for students to grasp. Over a quarter ($n = 17$) of participants perceived CABP as not inclusive to all. P21 noted: “some of my autistic learners enjoy learning through creative means, others prefer to learn through more traditional methods like textbooks and direct instruction. It fully depends on the individual's interests”. One teacher went as far as to say that autistic students “might not like to express themselves in that way which would make it impossible to take part and therefore [the student would] get defiance “codes” or end up sent to internal exclusion” (P36). Five teachers saw this as a barrier to implementing CABP in their mainstream classes, and suggested that an individualised approach would be required in order for CABP to be effectively implemented and delivered, “which can be challenging to manage in a mainstream classroom setting” (P39). One teacher noted that it can be “hard to differentiate teaching to include [CABP] very often” (P27).

Two teachers also felt that CABP could be hard for students to grasp, and seven perceived that CABP could lead to subjective assessments. Regarding the former, P14 expressed concern that “students wouldn't get the important learning outcome that they need to be able to recall (often in a very formulaic precise wording)” if they taught using CABP. This was seen to be particularly challenging when trying to teach abstract concepts in STEM subjects. Further, as “artistic works are often subjective” (P44), teachers noted that it could “be challenging to measure progress and determine if students are meeting specific educational goals. This lack of clear benchmarks may make it difficult for teachers to report on student achievement and for parents to understand their child's progress” (P48). It was noted by P44 that the subjectivity and “fuzzy” criteria for marking creative art-based works would be a barrier to using CABP in the classroom.

4.3.3.3.4. Infrastructural barriers and facilitators

The final barriers and facilitators to using CABP with autistic students in mainstream classrooms were *infrastructural*, and all participants identified infrastructural barriers in this category. The first infrastructural barrier was funding; two teachers suggested that “a limited budget for supplies could hinder me from using creative art-based pedagogy” (P47). Additionally, four teachers stated that “more budget” (P33) would facilitate their use of the pedagogy. This directly links to “resource constraints” (P51), the second infrastructural barrier. Seven teachers perceived “insufficient investment in teaching resources by schools” (P57) as a barrier to using CABP. This was supported by P49 who perceived: “Art activities often require a variety of supplies such as paints, brushes, clay, and paper. These can be expensive and may not be readily available in all schools”. Alongside this, seven teachers perceived that more resources would facilitate their use of CABP with autistic students. For example: “having access to a variety of art materials and resources would be very helpful”

(P47). Two teachers noted that poor facilities were also a barrier, as “a lack of dedicated art spaces or facilities can make it hard to conduct art activities in an optimal environment”

(P48). It was agreed by participants that either “having larger classrooms or ability to book spaces to work in.” (P6) or having “suitable spaces” (P1) which are “dedicated to art activities” (P47) would be facilitating factors.

Time was perceived by 13 teachers to be an *infrastructural* barrier to using CABP with autistic students in mainstream classrooms. P49 noted: “In a busy school schedule, it can be challenging to allocate sufficient time for in-depth art activities”. Limited planning time and time within the curriculum were additionally perceived to be barriers (P43). Similarly, more time was seen to be a facilitating factor by seven participants: “Having more time to plan these lessons as well as the mental space to come up with ideas [would facilitate my use of CABP]” (P6). Class size ($n = 7$) was the next teacher perceived infrastructural barrier to using CABP with autistic students in mainstream classrooms. P6 noted that it would be “VERY hard to do this with a full class of 32”, and this was supported by seven others. Four teachers noted that smaller class sizes might facilitate their use of CABP.

Another infrastructural barrier was a lack of relevant training for teachers ($n = 3$). A suggested facilitator to work around this was as follows: “Teachers need training on how to use these strategies in a classroom and the best strategies to use with autistic students. It’s very easy for a non specialist to lose control of a class in creative based activities” (P5). Additionally, another teacher suggested “training/professional development, mentorship from an experienced teacher, follow up observations/feedback on my classes” (P29). Seven teachers agreed that more training could facilitate the use of CABP in this context.

Alongside this, seven teachers perceived a lack in existing support in implementing CABP to be a barrier; “a lack of understanding or support from colleagues and administrators, it [makes] it difficult to implement these methods” (P47). Lacking teaching

assistant support for autistic students was additionally found to be a barrier, with one teacher saying “there are not enough TAs to support children as it is, let alone when trying to implement creative tasks in an otherwise non-creative subject” (P37). To facilitate CABP use in the mainstream classroom, 10 teachers suggested that “support and encouragement from school leaders” would encourage them (P46). P45 noted: “You can't do it alone. You have to work together”.

Finally, 13 teachers perceived the curriculum to be too prescriptive. One noted that more recently, teachers have “less autonomy [on curriculum] so it can be hard to make spaces for those types of lessons” (P2). P49 supported this: “Our curriculum is so pressured that although building students skills for cooperation and contribution are the most important for future success in life, we often have to teach content at the expense of these skills”. P3 went as far as to say that “the curriculum prescribes a particular way of teaching”. Therefore, the final facilitating factor was seen to be curriculum reform; though only coded in two questionnaire responses, teachers expressed that they wished to see a “reform of the curriculum to focus on outcomes being students skilled in cooperation and contribution”.

4.4. Discussion

Inductive content analysis identified risks and benefits associated with autistic mainstream secondary school students participating in CABP, as well as barriers and facilitators to implementation. This discussion will centre around three points: (1) teachers’ framing of autism; (2) CABP as a safe space; and (3) educational infrastructure.

4.4.1. Teachers’ framing of autism

Teachers in the current study demonstrated overwhelmingly, though perhaps subconsciously, corrective ideological framings of autism. For example, the identified risks and benefits of

CABP were predominantly associated with aligning autistic characteristics with so-called neurotypical norms (Robinson & Crane, 2025). In total, 43 codes were identified concerning teachers' perceptions of the role of CABP in the personal development of autistic students. Each of these codes was linked to a corrective ideological framing of autism based on so-called autistic impairments (i.e., an impairment in social interaction; American Psychiatric Association, 2013a). For example, teachers perceived CABP to be a beneficial teaching tool to use with autistic students, because it could help to develop their “social skills, such as communication, cooperation, and turn-taking [which they perceived to be] often challenging for autistic students”.

Similarly teachers in the current study perceived a theory of mind (ToM) deficit (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985) in their autistic students, and perceived CABP to be a beneficial tool to use with autistic students because it “can help to develop empathy”. Autism scholars and activists have widely disputed the idea that autistic individuals present with a theory of mind deficit, and instead consider the socio-communicative differences that autistic individuals experience to be caused by a mutual misunderstanding, as explained by the double- (Milton et al., 2022; Rizzo, 2023) or triple- (Shaw et al., 2023) empathy problem. This more developed understanding of theories of autism was not evident in teachers' questionnaire responses. Further, as discussed in the introduction of this report, this more developed understanding of theories of autism is also not evident in existing research (i.e., Kehl, 2021), either.

So, it would appear that there is a gap between our evolving understanding of autism and teachers' perceptions of their autistic students. Bolourian et al. (2022) perceives it to be positive that teachers have an awareness of defined clinical autistic characteristics, as this awareness provides teachers with a good understanding of autism. However, current research would suggest that this may not be the case. Teacher responses in existing research and in the

current study suggests that this clinical awareness aligns teachers with an outdated corrective ideological framing of autism, which in turn appears to have resulted in autistic students' clinically defined characteristics being considered by teachers to be limitations and barriers to teaching them (McNamara et al., 2022). However, there is limited data to support this argument, therefore further exploration of teachers' perceptions of autism, and the impact of those perceptions on the way they teach their autistic students, is recommended.

4.4.2. CABP as a 'safe space'

Safe spaces are defined as places where individuals can freely, without fear, share their experiences (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019) and be themselves (Thorne, 2014), whilst exploring controversial topics (Vacchelli, 2021). Safe spaces are physically and socially contextually dependent, and maintaining safe spaces requires reactive and productive efforts from teaching staff (The Roestone Collective, 2014). Safe spaces are intersectionality inclusive (The Roestone Collective, 2014) and comfortable; they prevent harm (Boostrom, 1998), and within safe spaces, individuals practice acceptance, empathy (Mearns Macdonald, 2021), "no judgement" and trust (Vacchelli, 2021).

CABP being considered a safe space in educational contexts is a recurring theme in CABP research. For example, teachers have called drama pedagogy "safe and structured", "risk-free", and a "supportive, safe environment" (Doyle, 2021). This is supported by findings in the current study, within which participants defined CABP as "safe and controlled", and "safe and predictable". Other reference to safe spaces in the current study were made concerning the development of autistic mainstream secondary school students' socio-communicative skills (i.e., "a safe way of engaging with the feelings and thoughts of other people" and "it encourages [...] exploring other people's emotions in a controlled environment"). This was supported by existing literature. For example, Mages' (2018)

participants considered a CABP activity to afford students a safe space within which they could practice, amongst other things, conflict resolution.

However, it could be argued that it is impossible to promise wholly safe spaces in educational contexts, and that to do so could be considered both unrealistic and dangerous (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019). Schools are inherently unsafe (The Roestone Collective, 2014), as how safe a place is depends on the individuals who are in the room and the power structures that exist between them; a safe space for one student may be an unsafe space for another (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019). One teacher suggested that such implicit power and social structures may actually make CABP less safe for some autistic students, as they participate in CABP “but don’t have the awareness of social context and so can say inappropriate things or get into a situation where other students mock them”. Another teacher supported this, noting that their autistic students’ “lack of social cues can be problematic in group work approaches”.

Finally, though they had not been identified in previous research, the current study identified a number of teacher perceived risks associated with autistic students participating in CABP: (1) CABP can be overstimulating; (2) CABP can be exposing; (3) CABP can be unpredictable; (4) CABP can be dysregulating; and (5) group work and collaboration in CABP can be challenging. With these newly identified risks in-mind, it would appear irresponsible to define CABP as a wholly safe space for autistic students in mainstream secondary schools.

4.4.3. Educational infrastructure

Educational infrastructure is defined as the structures which facilitate educational function; they are built and maintained, but remain in the background of educational policy and practice (Hopkins & Woulfin, 2015). Such structures allow school staff to not only provide

and maintain, but to improve teaching and learning (Shirrell et al., 2019). Educational infrastructure includes physical infrastructure, such as classrooms, lighting, materials, toilet access, learning aids or technology (Espinosa Andrade et al., 2024; Larsson & Löwstedt, 2023), as well as systemic infrastructure, such as time, funding, curriculum and teacher training. Participants in the current study identified eight infrastructural barriers and facilitators to using CABP with autistic students in mainstream secondary schools: (1) class size; (2) funding; (3) time; (4) resources (5) facilities; (6) curriculum & subjects; (7) training; and (8) support. This perception of infrastructural barriers is perhaps unsurprising given that educational infrastructure has direct links to educational practice (Hopkins & Woulfin, 2015).

It is also perhaps unsurprising given the similar findings in analogous research. For example, participants in Doyle (2021) perceived that lacking exposure to alternative pedagogies throughout teacher training and continued professional development (CPD), and a rigid curriculum impacted their ability to use drama-based inclusive educational tools in their primary school classrooms. Current study participants supported this, noting that “[t]eachers need training on how to use these strategies in a classroom and the best strategies to use with autistic students. It’s very easy for a non-specialist to lose control of a class in creative based activities, which could be damaging for an autistic student”.

Although research concerning CABP in secondary schools has consistently identified educational infrastructure as a barrier to implementing CABP with autistic students (i.e., Doyle & Kim, 2025), no research has been found to explore whether the reduction of infrastructural barriers to pedagogical change is possible in England, or to explore the ways in which infrastructural barriers could be reduced. However, 75% of teachers who answered the question: *How likely are you to use creative arts-based pedagogy with autistic students in your practice?* suggested that they were either somewhat or extremely likely to use CABP in their practice, whilst only 25.9% of respondents stated that they currently use CABP

frequently in their practice (34.5% used CABP just “sometimes”). Further, the majority (68.63%) of barriers to implementing CABP with autistic students in the classroom identified as being infrastructural. Therefore, perhaps there is value in exploring the ways in which infrastructural barriers could be overcome to positively impact the implementation of CABP in mainstream secondary schools in England, not just for autistic students but for the wider student body. This would, of course, need to be predicated on an evidence-base for clear benefits to the approach.

4.4.4. Limitations

Limitations to this study exist. The first limitation relates to the potential inclusion of AI generated questionnaire responses in data analysis.

4.4.4.1. AI generated questionnaire responses

Researchers run the risk of data quality issues when recruiting participants via social media (Pozzar et al., 2020). The first researcher disseminated the study advert across social media, amongst other outlets, a number of times during the data collection period. After one round of dissemination, approximately 40 questionnaire responses were received across a 24-hour period. Whilst some responses appeared to be authentic, others were suspicious; it was determined that a number of responses were AI generated. After consulting with the local ethics committee, the authors made the decision to exclude responses suspected to be AI generated based on the following criteria: (1) the response has = / < 43% progress or has entirely blank qualitative text responses ($n = 15$); (2) qualitative text responses are not in English ($n = 4$); (3) Qualitative text responses are nonsensical, contradictory, or identical to responses from other participants ($n = 5$; Storozuk et al., 2020). Additionally, the decision was made that responses were not to be excluded based on: (1) short response times, none of

the suspicious responses had abnormally short response times therefore this was not seen to be an accurate measure; (2) IP addresses or geolocation, because collecting and using such data was not built into the ethical approval for this study; (3) response readability, a number of responses submitted prior to the suspicious responses were formatted in bullet points and not in full sentences, therefore this did not appear to be an accurate measure. Applying these criteria resulted in the exclusion of 24, and the analysis of 58 total responses.

4.4.4.2. Self-selection bias

Another limitation of this study is the potential for self-selection bias; as participants chose to participate in this study, rather than being selected through a more structured method, such as randomised recruitment, they may not be representative of the wider population of teachers in England.

4.4.4.3. Concerning autism or concerning the whole school population?

The final limitation of this study concerns the population of mainstream secondary school students under discussion. Whilst each questionnaire question made reference to autistic individuals (i.e., “What do you perceive to be the positives of creative art-based pedagogy in the context of teaching autistic students in a mainstream school?”), some responses were not specific to autistic students’ experiences. For example, one benefit outlined by P6 was that CABP facilitates “more noteworthy lessons where students better remember and engage”. It is unclear, from this response, whether this is a specific benefit for autistic students, or for the whole school population. As the questionnaire questions did specify that we were looking for examples from an autistic population, assumptions were made that participants were discussing their autistic students in responses which were ambiguous. This, however, cannot

be verified. Further research would be needed to explore whether the findings from this study are autism specific, or whether they are applicable across a whole school population.

4.4.5. Recommendations for future research

Based on these findings and discussion points, we recommend further exploration into the following questions: (1) How do teachers perceive their autistic students and how does this impact the ways in which they teach them? (2) how can infrastructural barriers be overcome to positively impact the implementation of CABP in mainstream secondary schools in England? and (3) should CABP be implemented with autistic students in a mainstream secondary school context?

4.5. Conclusions

The current study, while drawing on rich qualitative responses, was relatively small including the perceptions of only 58 teachers in England. Further research with a larger sample would help to shed light on whether CABP should or should not be implemented when working with autistic students in mainstream secondary schools. However, the data do suggest that teachers perceive CABP to be a safe space for autistic students in mainstream secondary schools in England. They also identified both risks (overstimulation, feeling exposed, unpredictability, dysregulation and collaborative challenges) and benefits (memorable & engaging, inclusive & accessible, fun, encouraging multi-sensory engagement). In particular, they identified personal development benefits (provides opportunities for non-verbal self-expression, helps develop social skills, confidence, understanding of others and imaginative skills) when using CABP with this population. Such perceptions are, perhaps, grounded in an ableist framing of autism and do not necessarily consider the complexities of providing a wholly safe space for autistic students in school. Teacher participants also

identified a number of teacher-associated, student-associated and teaching- and learning-associated barriers and facilitators to implementing CABP in a mainstream secondary school context with autistic students. The majority of barriers, however, were infrastructural barriers. This finding is not exclusive to explorations of CABP or to autistic students, and could be transferable to broader pedagogical research, too. Further research is needed exploring the impact of educational infrastructure on pedagogical approaches.

5. “I wanted to paint a rainbow on it”: Autistic students’ perceptions on the use of creative arts-based pedagogy in the mainstream secondary classroom.

5.1. Introduction

Historically, research has been conducted *on* the autistic community rather than *with* them, resulting in poor representation of autistic voices in research that impacts them. Fricker (2007) and later Shaw et al. (2024) coined this an *epistemic injustice* which has resulted in misrepresented research findings and a persistent medical framing of autism (Hobson et al., 2023). Epistemic injustice is evident at the intersection between research on autism and creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP), as will become clear throughout the introduction of this paper. This is concerning because research findings about the benefits of CABP for autistic students ultimately have the greatest impact on autistic individuals themselves (Shaw et al., 2024).

In an attempt to rectify this epistemic injustice, academics suggest seeking the perceptions of the autistic community (Shaw et al., 2024) in research. With that in mind, this paper reports on a study which, framed by a neurodiversity affirmative paradigm, sought autistic voices concerning their experiences and perceptions of CABP use in mainstream secondary school classrooms.

5.1.1 CABP and autism

Pedagogy is concerned with how a teacher teaches (Lawson, 2013), so CABP can simply be defined as *how a teacher uses the creative arts to teach*. For example, teachers may use a hot seating activity (Andrews et al., 2021) or learning through song (Kumar et al., 2022) to teach students curricular content. A systematic review synthesising five reports which explore

stakeholders' perceptions of the use of CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school students described CABP as a whole-class interactive, collaborative and multi-modal approach which involves the use of the creative arts as pedagogical tools in a classroom environment (Doyle & Kim, 2025).

Benefits of facilitating CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school students have been identified by existing research, including a systematic review (Doyle & Kim, 2025). For example, researchers identified more opportunities for reciprocal communication (Kehl, 2021), improved work ethic (Wiltshire, 2021), and camaraderie (Kehl, 2021) between autistic students during CABP participation. Advantageous outcomes of CABP have also been reported, such as improved spontaneity and imagination (Mendez-Martinez & Fernandez-Rio, 2021), improved content knowledge (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019), and enhanced communication skills including length and complexity of speech (Drapete, 2017). Improved theory of mind (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2019), peer relationships (Kehl, 2021) and self-expression (Wiltshire, 2021) have also been described as positive outcomes of CABP participation for autistic students in mainstream schools.

These findings suggest a positive picture. However, a reported positivity bias in this field raises questions about the reliability and validity of such findings (Doyle, Kim & Asbury, 2025) For example, researchers exploring the use of creative arts based educational practices (CAEPs), such as CABP, with autistic students have noted limitations in research such as leading questions (Müller et al., 2017), sample and selection bias (Cardella, 2014) and homogeneous samples (Devereaux, 2017) paired with minimal discussion of risks. Recently, however, some risks have been identified. For example, one study which collated the perceptions of mainstream secondary school teachers on using CABP with autistic students identified potential for CABP to be overstimulating, dysregulating, exposing and

unpredictable; the group-work and collaboration associated with CABP was also considered to be a challenge for autistic students (Doyle & Asbury, 2025).

5.1.2. An ontological conflict

The aforementioned lack of autistic voices on the matter, alongside the acknowledgement of a positivity bias in the field and the recent identification of risks associated with CABP, suggests that a decision on whether CABP should be implemented with autistic students in mainstream schools is not straightforward. This is further supported by the acknowledgement that the previously cited perceptions were rooted in an ableist ontological framing of autism, meaning there was a distinct focus on the ability for CABP to target *autistic deficits* (e.g., Gunter, 1993; Karnezi, 2008; Orr et al., 1998; White, 2011). For example, the perception of the teachers cited above, that CABP was risky to use with autistic mainstream secondary school students due to the need for collaboration and group work, is perhaps grounded in the perception that autistic individuals have a deficit in social functioning. The autistic community has critiqued this curative framing of autism, which measures autistic individuals characteristics against non-autistic standards (Robinson & Crane, 2025). This framing has been criticised for being binary, and considering autism to only be aligned with the behavioral criteria outlined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013a): social-communicative difficulties and restricted, repetitive, and idiosyncratic behaviours (Chapman, 2019). Instead, the autistic community calls for change towards a more neurodiversity affirmative ontological framing of autism (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021).

Within a neurodiversity affirmative ontological framework, autism can be considered a different way of thinking, rather than a set of behavioural deficits; in other words, autistic

differences are understood to be intersubjective, rather than subjective or interconnected with individual cognition (Chapman, 2019). Some autistic individuals support the idea that autism is a difference rather than a deficit; one group of participants reflected that they perceived their autism to be “value-neutral”, in the same way as height or handedness (Botha et al., 2022). Exploring literature on the concept of imagination in autistic individuals illustrates this ontological conflict. While deficit-focused research posits that autistic individuals exhibit a deficit in imaginative capabilities (Baron-Cohen, 1989), Denomey and D’Angiulli (2025) argue that any suggestion that autistic individuals lack imagination are subjective, reflecting the biases of those making the judgment. So, rather than a deficit in imaginative capabilities, perhaps a double empathy problem (Milton, 2012) is at play, wherein there is a mutual misunderstanding between autistic and non-autistic individuals as to what constitutes imagination.

All of that is not to say that autistic individuals who align themselves with a neurodiversity affirmative framing of autism do not perceive there to be challenges associated with being autistic; rather, under a neurodiversity affirmative framing, the source of the challenge is reframed. More specifically, the root of the challenges autistic individuals face is suggested to be the lacking societal understanding of autism (as described by the social model of disability; Oliver, 2013), rather than individual difficulties. An example of this is the reflection of one participant in Botha, Dibb and Frost (2022): “mainstream society shuns anything even fractionally different from it [...] we are told to perform a circus doggy act every single waking moment of our lives. We are told to fit in or die.” (p. 439).

5.1.3. Neurodiversity affirmative framing of autism and the potential benefits of CABP

When the environment rather than the individual is considered to be the cause of the day-to-day challenges which autistic students face, CABP could be considered a useful approach for alleviating environmental barriers and supporting autistic students to achieve and thrive (Department for Education, 2025). For example, CAEPs such as CABP have been identified as inclusive due to their social constructivist, interactive, collaborative and multi-modal approach (Doyle & Kim, 2025). CABPs have also been considered to be neurodiversity affirmative spaces (Hogle, 2021) which are tailorable to individual needs (White, 2011), with a focus on process over outcome (Doyle & Kim, 2025). Finally, CABP reportedly provides the scaffolds of a *safe space* for autistic individuals in a mainstream secondary school context, according to teacher participants in Kehl (2021). These are all qualities which are inherent to inclusive approaches designed to meet the needs of a wide range of students, such as Universal Design for Learning (Ralabate, 2011).

5.1.4 Summary

So, CABP may be a potentially useful approach for alleviating environmental barriers to thriving in mainstream secondary schools for autistic students. However, we have identified numerous limitations in the existing research, including a positivity bias and a corrective ideological framing of autism. Even in the small pool of neurodiversity affirmative research, there remains a significant lack of autistic voices in the field. Therefore, before identifying CABP as a teaching approach in mainstream education which could potentially support autistic students to achieve and thrive (Department for Education, 2025), it is important that autistic voices are heard concerning their experiences and perceptions of this approach.

Therefore, the current study aimed to explore the perceptions of autistic students on teachers' use of CABP in a mainstream secondary school context. Accordingly, authors asked the following research questions: (1) How do autistic young people in mainstream secondary schools perceive CABP? (2) What do autistic young people perceive as factors that promote and obstruct teachers' use of CABP in the mainstream classroom? (3) What do autistic young people believe is essential to the future of CABP? (4) How do autistic young people believe their autism affects their views on CABP?

5.2. Methods

5.2.1. Application of a neurodiversity paradigm

Neurodiversity affirmative research should be conducted “by” and “with” the community, rather than “for” or “on” them (van Schaik, 2021). Therefore, a co-production methodology was used at every stage of our research design and data collection. The authors hired an autistic co-producer who acted as a collaborator in the knowledge production process (Albert et al., 2023; Bottomley et al., 2024; Pettican et al., 2023). The ladder of co-production positions community involvement along a continuum of seven stages: (1) coercion; (2) educating; (3) informing; (4) consultation; (5) engagement; (6) co-design; and (7) co-production. As involvement progresses up the ladder, decision-making power increasingly shifts towards shared or community-based control. The top level, co-production, represents an equal partnership between researchers and community members, who collaborate on project design and share strategic decision-making responsibility (thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk). Our collaboration with the autistic expert by experience would be situated at this final stage of co-production as we worked in partnership across all stages of the research process. Specifically, we met via Zoom twice during the design phase of this study to jointly develop

and refine the research design, methods, and materials. In the first meeting, I shared my preliminary ideas for data collection, and the co-producer presented their own ideas and critiques. For example, they recommended making it explicit to participants that they would receive interview questions in advance, as this could make participation more appealing: “It may be appropriate to provide the participants with an overview of what will be asked in the interview beforehand. [...] I feel it saves time and helps with the follow up questions. [...] I do feel it can definitely ease anxiety around an interview and ensure they have answers as they may say no to things or not know what to say but that could be just from failing to remember”. In our second meeting, we co-produced the study materials and methods, jointly agreeing on the final versions used for data collection. The co-producer reviewed and approved all materials prior to their use. They also identified and corrected several typographical errors, including the accidental use of “person with autism” on one information sheet instead of “autistic person,” which did not align with the paradigmatic approach of the studies that we had discussed in our first meeting.

This partnership was collaborative and decision-making, not merely consultative. This is one example of many in which the collaboration between the co-producer and I improved the overall quality of the study. The co-producer’s insights ensured that study materials were not only accurate but also aligned with autistic participants’ preferences and needs. The co-producer’s contributions improved the accessibility and clarity of the research design. Further, as previously discussed, this collaboration actively challenged the existing epistemic injustice in the field. The input of the autistic co-producer shaped decisions that might otherwise have been made without autistic perspectives, ensuring that the research was grounded in lived experience rather than allistic assumptions.

Table 5.1

Participant Feedback

How would you rate your understanding of the research, based on the information provided before the interview?	How would you rate the accessibility of information provided before the interview?	How would you rate your understanding of the questions that were asked during the interview?	How would you rate the accessibility of the interview itself?	How would you rate your communication with the researcher from start to end?	If we were going to have this chat again, what would you like to stay the same, because it helped you have a good experience?	If we were going to have this chat again, what would you like to change, so that you would have a better experience?	Open Feedback: (please feel free to share any and all other bits of feedback on the process that you might have!)
Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	video call	/	/
Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	Seeing the questions ahead of time helped a lot. I liked it being on Zoom once I got the hang of it. I liked how transparent it was - she explained what she was researching and how it would all work so I knew exactly what was happening.	Nothing	It was very enjoyable.

Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	Yes, I would	In person would be better too	The host is a very nice and friendly lady, with high tolerance. Even though she could not really hear me clearly, but she was patient enough. Thank you, I was overall comfortable speaking to the host.
Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	I liked having clear questions and seeing them in advance so I knew what to expect. I liked doing the interview on Zoom.	I can't think of anything.	[name]'s mum: I thought the whole process was very professional and easy for [name] to engage with. The £5 voucher was a nice touch, but [name] might have done the interview without this incentive.
Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	The questions and the way you were asking them was really good	Nothing	
Good	Good	Could be better	Good	Good	The questions	Nothing	

5.2.2. Positionality Statement

The first author has worked as an applied theatre practitioner and in mainstream classrooms supporting neurodivergent students. These experiences influenced her perception of the benefits of using the creative arts when working with autistic students, developed her understanding of the experiences of autistic students in formal education, and sparked her interest in exploring creative approaches to inclusive education with autistic students. These factors undoubtedly informed her positionality when conducting this research. Therefore, two steps were taken to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings: (1) a paid autistic co-producer acted as a collaborator in the knowledge production process, and (2) the second author reviewed and offered feedback on data collection tools, transcripts, codes and themes at every stage of research design, data collection and data analysis.

5.2.3. Participants

Ten autistic mainstream secondary school students (5 male, 5 female) aged 11-16 participated in this online interview study. Participants were recruited through online convenience (snowball) sampling across social media, via the National Autistic Society, and through direct emails to schools. Participants were required to be diagnosed as autistic, and to be enrolled in a mainstream secondary school in England. To ensure the data were fully anonymous, no demographic information was collected concerning location, race, or ethnicity as these characteristics were not relevant to the research questions.

5.2.4. Data Collection

Autistic students were required to complete a google-based assent form, and formal consent was gained from a parent / carer using a second google form. Participants were notified that

all communication would be sent to both themselves, and their parents / carers. The interviewer confirmed informed assent with participants at the onset of the online interviews. Participants were sent the interview questions (see Table 5.2) in advance, and the Zoom interview happened at a time that was convenient for them.

Table 5.2

Interview Questions

Interview Questions	Follow up Questions
What about school do you like?	What is your favourite thing about school?
What about school do you dislike?	What is your least favourite thing about school?
Do you partake in any extracurricular activities?	Can you tell me a bit about them?
What is your favourite class/subject in school?	Why is it your favourite? Is there anything you don't like about it? If so, what? How does the teacher teach?
What is your least favourite class/subject in school?	Why is it your least favourite? Is there anything you like about it? If so, what? How does the teacher teach?
If any, which of the creative arts do you like to take part in?	/
How do the creative arts, or the thought of the creative arts make you feel?	/
How do you think your teachers feel about CABP?	Do you think your teachers understand what it is? What makes you think that?
Do you think CABP is a method that teachers use at the moment when teaching autistic students?	Please could you give me an example of a time you were taught using CABP?
What would you / did you like about being taught using CABP?	Why?

What would you / did you dislike about being taught using CABP?	Why?
Do you think you (would) learn from a lesson where the teacher taught using CABP better, worse, the same as you would learn in a lesson where you were taught sitting down looking at the front?	Why?
Do you feel more comfortable and confident when you are learning creatively, or when you are learning sitting down and looking at the front?	Why? Is there another different way you would prefer to be taught? Why? Does it elicit any particular feelings?
Based on our conversation, do you think CABP is a method that teachers should use when teaching autistic students?	If yes What might be some good steps to take? What would need to happen to make it easier for your teachers to use CABP in your classes? Is there anything else that you think would be helpful? If no Is there anything that would change your mind on this? How would you like to be taught by your teachers instead?
Now the questions will change slightly, to discuss whether you feel like being autistic makes you answer these questions differently. First, can you tell me a bit about what being autistic means for you?	/
How does being autistic impact your experience in school?	Do you feel like the things that help you in school are different to the things that help your non-autistic classmates? If so, what is different? Do you feel like teachers understand how to help you do well in school? What makes you feel that way?
Do you feel like being autistic makes you feel differently about creative arts?	How so?

Do you feel like being autistic In what way?
changes the way you participate in
creative arts?

Do you have any questions for me?

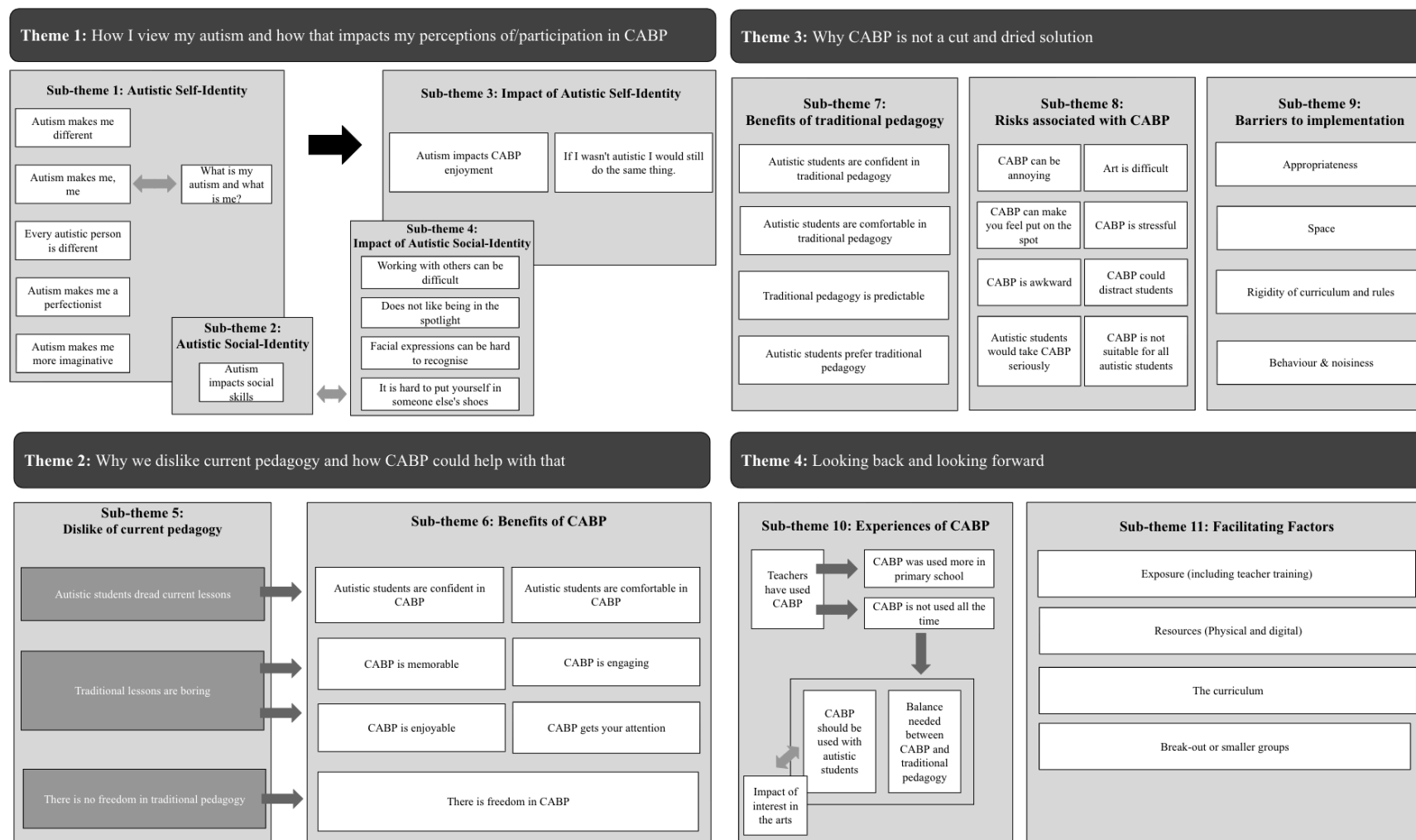
5.2.5. Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed by the interviewer within 24-hours of conducting the interview and transcripts were sent to the participant and their parent/carer to member check. Only one participant requested a change, due to a typographical error on the original transcript.

Final transcripts were re-read and uploaded to NVivo in January 2025 and were analysed using inductive reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2022) via NVivo and by hand. The first author coded the transcripts in NVivo, and the developing coding framework was discussed with the second author throughout this process. The first two rounds of coding were inductive and flexible (i.e., coded by segment rather than line by line, and not coded within an existing framework). Then, following discussion with the second author, the first author re-coded each transcript deductively, using the developed coding framework, to ensure no data were missed. Next, the first author printed out the coding framework and collated codes which shared meaning by hand, thus generating a group of initial themes, which were then reviewed by both authors. Themes were refined by the first author numerous times. Once both authors were satisfied that the codes and themes represented the views of the autistic student participants, themes were finalised and named (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1

Thematic Map



5.3. Findings

Four themes and 11 sub-themes were developed using reflexive thematic analysis: (1) How I view my autism and how that impacts my perceptions of, and participation in, CABP; (2) Why we dislike current pedagogy and how CABP could help; (3) Why CABP is not a cut and dried solution; and (4) Looking back and looking forward (See Figure 13 for a Thematic Map).

5.3.1. How I view my autism and how that impacts my perceptions of, and participation in, CABP

5.3.1.1. Autistic self-identity

Participants perceived complexity in autistic self-identity because every autistic person was understood to be different. This made it "hard to speak for all autistic students" (P5). However, the ways in which participants managed their differences from both autistic and non-autistic peers varied. P8 took a nuanced approach, by considering both their own thoughts and the thoughts of neurotypicals when making decisions: "I think [being autistic] just means being slightly different, I tend to think more into what a neurotypical person would think, and then try and answer with that in mind, as well as what I actually think". By contrast, P1 proudly embraced their difference from non-autistic individuals: "I think being autistic is like - I'm different to a lot of people. But like that's what makes me, me. I'm not ashamed".

The perception that being autistic "makes me, me" was supported by others, for example: "I think that [autism is] like, just generally who I am" (P10). Further, it was seen as difficult to recognise a boundary between autism and personality traits: "well [...] I don't always know what is autism, and what is just my personality" (P5). P4 concurred, noting that

the reality of autistic self-identity was complex; while they did think that being autistic impacted their likes, dislikes and skills, they did not think that autism made up their entire identity: “being autistic doesn't have to be the whole of me, you know, and I can be [name], who's obsessed with maths. And I can be [name] who hates grammar without being [name], who's autistic”.

5.3.1.2. Autistic social-identity

The only consensus on how autistic students viewed their autism was that participants felt that being autistic impacted their social skills. P3, for example, discussed their difficulties in observing social cues:

"I'm pretty sure [that being autistic] definitely limits my social interactions and bits, like I don't quite pick up on like social cues, I've been told. Yeah. And I find it a bit hard to like, tell when someone's really upset or something if it's not super obvious".

Similarly, P5 noted: "I often find it quite difficult to see what people mean and how they feel". This was supported by P6, who noted that they were shy, compared to their peers: "I've always been a bit shy with some people. Like my best friend finds it really easy to talk to people and saying thank you and stuff. But I never, I never do it".

5.3.1.3. Impact of autistic self-identity on perceptions of, and participation in, CABP

Participants had varied perceptions of the impact of their autistic self- and social- identity on their perceptions of, and participation in, CABP. For example, P1 and P7 did not perceive being autistic to be relevant: "if I wasn't autistic I would still do the same thing" (P7). P4,

however, was less sure. When asked if they thought that being autistic changed the way they participated in the creative arts, they replied: "I'm not sure. [...], it changes how enthusiastically I participate in them. Certainly. But generally not really". Perhaps this uncertainty could be due to the aforementioned complexity of separating autistic and personality traits, but also the diversity of creative arts available.

The remaining seven autistic students did consider being autistic to impact how they thought about and participated in CABP. For example, autism was perceived to impact CABP enjoyment. P6 saw the creative arts, and music in particular, as a tool for self-regulation: "I really like music, because it really helps me calm down when things go wrong". Similarly, a love of reading was seen to contribute to CABP enjoyment by P5: "my love of books, which might be to do with my autism, also means I read lots of books". In turn, this love of books was perceived to contribute to this student's skills in creative writing.

However, P8 felt that being autistic made them feel more negatively about the creative arts: "I definitely see it more as something that needs to be done rather than something that should really be enjoyed [...] I see it as, I need to go, then, to make this artwork, not I'm doing this to be creative". It is possible that this perception of the impact of autism on CABP participation could be linked to the idea of autism being a factor in an individual's perfectionism. P5 noted that their perfectionism, which they perceived to be an autistic trait, impacted the way in which they completed tasks at school: "I think [autism] can sometimes make me be a bit of a perfectionist. Maybe I worry too much if [my artwork] is not good enough".

5.3.1.4. Impact of autistic social-identity on perceptions of, and participation in, CABP

Social difficulties, which participants noted that they experienced because they were autistic, were perceived to be a challenge to CABP participation. A reason for this could be that the creative arts were considered social mediums: "it tends to be that you have to communicate with people more [in CABP than traditional pedagogical approaches] which can be more difficult" (P10). P6 supported the idea that CABP could be difficult for autistic students to participate in due to a requirement to work in groups: "I also don't like working in teams with people who, like doing teamwork, with people I haven't chosen". P3 also noted that they can struggle with communicating with their peers during CABP because they become worried when there is a requirement to be in the spotlight: "I've been told that the whole me not liking being in the spotlight stuff is kind of related to [being autistic]. I'm not quite as good at getting things across sometimes, or might speak too fast in comparison to my classmates".

When asked whether being autistic impacted how they felt about or joined in with the creative arts, P4 explained that being autistic made them feel differently about drama due to their struggle with recognising facial cues: "[being autistic] makes me feel different about drama because of all the body language and facial expressions, things". Another participant, when asked the same question, noted that being autistic impacted how they joined in with CABP because it can be difficult to put themselves in someone else's shoes: "Yeah, sometimes. I like acting. I do. I really like drama and acting. But sometimes there are roles that I find hard to impersonate" (P6).

To summarise, autistic mainstream secondary school students perceived complexity in autistic self-identity; they perceived that while being autistic made them, them, it also made them different from their peers. One of those key differences was identified to be

interconnected to their social identity, as participants perceived that being autistic negatively impacted their social skills. This socially-focused sense of self was perceived to impact perceptions of and participation in CABP, because participants perceived that their social identity resulted in difficulties working with others and recognising facial expressions and a dislike for being in the spotlight.

5.3.2. Why we dislike current pedagogy and how CABP could help

5.3.2.1. Dislike of current pedagogy

All participants, including those who were less eager to participate in CABP, discussed things they disliked about current pedagogy and ways in which CABP might improve their learning experiences. P2 noted: “[if lessons were more creative] I wouldn't be dreading them”. When asked why, they said they were more comfortable in creative lessons, and that: “It would be an easier way for everyone to learn”. P3 supported this, noting that they would be more comfortable in lessons “where they're using creative arts”. P10 suggested that the reason for this increased comfort and confidence in class was enjoyment and a sense of camaraderie:

I'm more likely to want to join in, so I think it doesn't really bother me if I have, if I have to like, get up and go do something. [Also,] because generally creative things, involve the entire class, I feel less pressured because then it doesn't matter as much, it seems to not matter as much if you don't do something quite correctly or get something wrong.

5.3.2.1.1. Engagement and retention

One reason students noted that they dreaded traditional lessons was that they saw them as boring; students perceived that their teachers often “choose not to do anything fun. Yeah. So it ends up just being really boring” (P2). P10 felt as though this impacted their concentration and engagement with the lesson content:

I find it much harder to concentrate when teachers are standing at the front and telling me to do something or telling me about something unless it's a subject I'm particularly interested in [...] I tend to lose interest quicker than if they were [...] using something more creative and something more engaging.

CABP was perceived by some to alleviate this challenge: “I think the creative pedagogy is quite useful because it captures the attention of other parts of your brain, almost, it is harder to ignore, or to let your brain just gloss over” (P5). All but one participant agreed, noting that CABP was memorable: “We've had like songs, and there was one in geography about tectonic plates which still stuck with me” (P8). However, sometimes the songs were only memorable because they were so annoying: “with music, sometimes the song could be highly irritating. And you remember them very clearly. Just because they're really annoying” (P10).

Primarily, students referred to learning through songs. However, P4 and P6 noted that drama activities were memorable too: “[I remember] like, the fun bits.[...], sometimes in primary school where we did the hot seats, and someone made a funny response to a question, and we all laughed” (P6). P3 went as far as to suggest that even using CABP in only one part of the lesson impacted how well they remembered the lesson as a whole: “It makes

the whole lesson a bit more memorable, even if you only did it, for, like one little part of it [...] because you're like, oh, that's when we did that song, we also learned about this and that”.

As well as being memorable, CABP was seen by seven participants to be enjoyable, compared to a perception of traditional pedagogy as boring: “My friend [...] learned all the elements of the periodic table through a song [and] because of, like horrible histories, the horrible histories, monarch song, I remembered all the monarchs. We basically kept doing fact offs. It was really funny” (P6). Whilst students noted that they were still able to perform well in traditional lessons, it was the fun aspect of CABP that drew them to it: “there was just one art project where you got to design a fantasy creature and then draw it with lots of sketching. And that was where I got my best mark, because, yeah, it was lots of fun”.

5.3.2.1.2. Freedom

P2 suggested that there is no freedom in traditional pedagogy, even in creative lessons:

I like to do things my own way. If I can't paint something on my train I get a bit frustrated. They say you're gonna make your own train. You're gonna take it home and you're gonna love it because that's your hard work. When I take it home I'd be like... I wanted to paint a rainbow on it.

However, four participants did perceive freedom in CABP. For example, P4 liked that in CABP there is “less of a set way of doing things”. Similarly, when using art to support their revision for exams, P8 liked that “we got a lot more choice to be able to do what we wanted to do and there was more kind of freedom than just having to do the work that was set”.

However, P8 did suggest that this freedom could lead to poor behaviour: “I think sometimes

people see it as a way to then just mess around in that lesson, because obviously not having that rigid structure is more free flowing. So then they get to mess around more”. This suggests that, perhaps, CABP is not a cut and dried solution to the challenges some autistic students currently experience in school.

5.3.3. Why CABP is not a cut and dried solution

5.3.3.1. Benefits of traditional pedagogy

P1, P4, P5 and P8 identified some benefits to traditional pedagogical approaches. For example, P4 noted that: “personally, I find I learn better if it's just the teacher standing, talking [...] generally I prefer it if I'm just sitting down and looking at the front definitely”.

Familiarity and predictability were perceived benefits to traditional pedagogy but participants did not see this as ruling out CABP. For example, P5 stated:

I suppose I can sometimes feel confident when I am in familiar surroundings, like just sitting and having a teacher at the front, but it would be nice to try out more creative things. It might just be because I am more used to a certain method of teaching.

P4 offered a different perspective, noting that the topic of the lesson is the factor which impacts their willingness to participate in CABP over traditional pedagogy, though traditional pedagogy was still their preference.

5.3.3.2. Risks associated with CABP

Participants also identified risks associated with CABP participation. For example, P1, P3 and P10 were concerned that CABP could be annoying: "I wouldn't want that in every single

lesson. But yeah, because, like, I would get a bit bored of that, and it would come in annoying quickly" (P1). Though all three students also noted that it was the annoying nature of CABP that made it memorable.

Alongside this, five participants were concerned about being put on the spot during CABP participation: "I feel like I don't like being in the spotlight. Yeah, it makes you a bit nervous and stuff" (P3). As well as being nervous, being asked to participate in CABP on the spot was seen to be annoying: "I found that a lot of times when there's music or things like that, especially things like hot seating, it's kind of annoying if you're there like, if you necessarily don't particularly want to go up, do the thing" (P10). Hot seating also made some participants feel awkward: "so I find it very awkward, especially when we're doing things like hot seating. I find it quite awkward doing that sometimes" (P4). Perhaps autistic students' social-identity could explain the feeling of awkwardness when impersonating others, or perhaps it was because autistic students "probably take [CABP; hot seating] really seriously" (P6).

Another risk associated with CABP, identified by P4 and P5, was that art can be difficult to participate in: "I'm not too keen on art, that's partly because I struggle with it, and I find art hard" (P4). P4 suggested that their perfectionism, an element of their autistic self-identity, could be the cause of this challenge: "I struggle with drawing, I'm a complete perfectionist as well. It's partly the teacher as well in that she is very strict, but I think that mostly it's kind of a combination of all of them that makes it hard". P4 went on to say that the difficulty that they experience with art-participation results in a loss of learning: "sometimes it can be that I'm struggling so much with the creative part of it. So like I'm stressing about the drama, for example, that I don't actually take in the learning" (P4). P2 agreed that CABP participation could result in a loss of learning, though for different reasons: "I'd get distracted.

And then when we actually started doing the actual work, I'd be singing the song. Yeah, rather than actually listening to the teacher".

Finally, P1, P4, P8 and P10 suggested that CABP was not suitable for all autistic students, noting that "Some [autistic people] don't like the creative arts" (P1). This was directly linked to their autistic self-concept, identified in Theme One, and their understanding that all autistic people are different.

5.3.3.3. Barriers to Implementation

The first, and arguably largest, of the identified barriers was that it is not always appropriate to use CABP. Participants argued that CABP was not appropriate in every subject: "it's a lot harder to do things like that, especially in much more rigid subjects like maths. [...] So I think it would be harder for them to learn to teach students that way" (P10). This was supported by P8 and P9 who felt that CABP would be "more useful in creative subjects" (P9).

P10 suggested that the reason that CABP is not suitable for maths, for example, was that "you just need to practise it loads of times to get it into your head". This speaks to autistic students' perceptions of the curricular and examination rigidity in subjects like maths. This was also seen to be a barrier to CABP implementation by P2 who perceived the rigid rules to be coming from the senior leadership teams: "[teachers] focus everything around their actual main lesson and they are told what to do by the head of the department. They can't change it, otherwise they'll be fired".

Also, P8 suggested that less rigidity, which could be achieved through CABP, may result in poorer student behaviour: "I think sometimes people see it as a way to then just mess around in that lesson, because obviously not having that rigid structure is more free flowing. So then they get to mess around more". P6 agreed, noting: "if the class gets too excited, it

could get really noisy". Further, P5 noted that they themselves had exhibited poor behaviour within CABP in the past: "maybe when I was younger and a bit more difficult I might sometimes not behave very well if I didn't like what we were doing".

Finally, autistic participants noted that they did not have enough space in school to comfortably participate in CABP: "Drama games and like drama, and like hot seating and stuff, might be harder to do, because that takes like a bigger space" (P1).

In summary, CABP was not considered to be a cut and dried solution to participants' dislike of traditional pedagogy.

5.3.4. Looking back and looking forward

5.3.4.1. Experiences of CABP

In terms of looking back, participants reflected that they had seen teachers use CABP in the past, albeit minimally, and some were able to provide examples: "Sometimes in French classes, we listened to songs to like, to memorise a certain thing or like, the different verbs to remember or the different endings of a tense" (P1). Music had been used in other students' classes, too: "in French [w]e have listened to songs to teach us specific things about, just like different words" (P10). P3 and P8 similarly remembered being taught using music.

The other most commonly referred to activity was hot-seating: "We did hot seating once last year with people doing characters like Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, and then we've had some before to do with characters and poems that we've studied in English" (P8). Similarly, P4 remembered their teacher using hot seating in English and history classes:

I've done some hot seating or like acting out like a play in some lessons, like an English lesson and sometimes in history as well. The teacher, like gets someone to be

a historical figure, or like something that happened with a historical figure and a historical figure, and a person playing the historical thing you had to like react to that.

P2, P4, P6 and P8 supported the idea that teachers had used hot seating activities:

"(I) can't think of anything in secondary sorry, we used it a lot in primary. So like if we're doing history [...] we were given certain roles and we hot-seated those roles from history, and we were asked questions about it, I think. And that was quite good fun, actually" (P4).

The perception that CABP was used more in primary school than secondary school was supported by others. For example, P2 noted that in year five (aged 9-10), they enjoyed participating in a hot seating activity about *The Railway Children*: "They asked us questions, and we had to answer, but as that person. It was more interesting than learning about English". However, it was commonly considered that CABP was not used consistently in secondary schools: "It's been done a few times in the years that I've been at my school, but it's not been done very often" (P8).

That being said, participants thought CABP should be used with autistic students in mainstream contexts: "I'd say, Yeah, because I've got other friends who are autistic as well and like it helps them, helps them more as well" (P5). Further, CABP was seen to be "a lot more enjoyable for everyone, and it seems to work" (P8). This was also supported by those who did not want to speak for the entire autistic community: "Well it is hard to speak for all autistic students but I think they should definitely give it a try. For many autistic children it could be very helpful" (P5).

However, participants did not want to see CABP take over from traditional pedagogy entirely. Rather, balance was necessary: "I wouldn't want that in every single lesson" (P1). P10, suggested that subject and students were important when deciding whether to use CABP:

I think a lot of it depends on the lesson, because there's some things which would be very difficult. And I think it also depends on the class because sometimes I think just the way the teacher teaches without that is perfectly fine like. But then, other times. it's like, would actually, it would really add to the lesson (P10).

P4 concurred, and added that the usefulness of CABP depended on the students being taught: "I think it definitely depends on which students are teaching and what you're teaching them".

Students' interests were seen to impact the effectiveness of CABP by other participants: "I think if I didn't enjoy drums and drama, I think, and music, I think I would have found it as boring or like the same level of boring as traditional lessons. I might have found them both boring" (P1). However, the interests of participants in this study varied from literary (fantasy books, writing stories), to sports (swimming), to game play (Roblox, board games), to TV (anime, The Hunger Games), to animals (pets, horses, wolves), and to the arts (music, singing, drawing). This suggests that the participant pool, who generally agreed on the value of CABP, was not biased towards those who participated in the creative arts as hobbies outside of school.

So, participants generally perceived that CABP should be implemented in mainstream secondary schools, as long as CABP does not take over from traditional pedagogy entirely.

Participants also suggested a number of factors which could facilitate this greater use of CABP.

5.3.4.2 Facilitating factors

The first facilitating factor identified by autistic participants was exposure, including teacher training. This was discussed by P3, 7 and 10, who felt that teachers should be trained on how to use different pedagogical approaches: "I think they should train teachers more on how to use this. You know, teaching teachers about the benefits of CABP techniques and how to practice them. Yeah, it's actually helpful. So most teachers actually know how to do this" (P7). P7 went on to suggest that collaborations with specialists would be beneficial: "I think I think they should like, you know, work with maybe art specialists or people that already have an idea or experience in this".

Next, resources were seen to facilitate CABP use: "more resources [should be] available to them to be able to do that kind of thing in the first place" (P3). P1 suggested that such resources might be easily accessible, for example, via Youtube: "even seeing a number of like songs from Youtube, about like a certain topic. That would be good to start off with".

One student suggested that CABP should be added to the curriculum (P7); further, curricular flexibility was seen to be a facilitating factor: "I think it would be good if the curriculum almost allowed them to make changes, say if they had a class that really did not like something" (P5). Finally, smaller or break-out groups were seen to facilitate use of CABP by autistic mainstream secondary school students by P2: "smaller breakout groups. I think, you know, you can give that focus to some of the students that are getting a lot out of it".

In summary, participants noted that their teachers have used CABP in their practice, and they were able to provide examples such as hot seating and learning through song. However, participants generally noted that these examples were from their memory of primary school. And that their secondary school teachers tended not to use creative pedagogical approaches. With that being said, and with the aforementioned risks considered, autistic students perceived that CABP should be implemented in their mainstream secondary school, as long as there was balance between it and a traditional pedagogical approach. In order to facilitate CABP implementation, students suggested that teachers should be better exposed to the pedagogy and be provided with more access to resources. Further, a more flexible curriculum and smaller break out groups would, perhaps, be useful.

5.4. Discussion

5.4.1. Autistic voices

This study is, to our knowledge, the first to collate the perceptions of autistic mainstream secondary school students on the use of CABP in their schools, and every effort was made to ensure that the research was conducted within a neurodiversity paradigm as described in Methods.

5.4.1.1. In support of pre-existing research

Benefits identified as being associated with using CABP with autistic students in mainstream secondary schools were generally well-aligned with the existing pool of research at this intersection. For example, numerous studies which excluded the voices of autistic participants reported that autistic secondary school students were enthusiastic (Wiltshire, 2021) to take part in CABP because it made them happy and provided opportunities for self-regulation

(Çevirgen et al., 2018). This was supported by autistic students in the current study who perceived CABP to be both self-regulating and enjoyable. Other benefits associated with CABP identified by autistic participants in the current study have also been identified in pre-existing literature. For example, teachers agree that CABP is memorable, engaging, inclusive and accessible (Doyle & Asbury, 2025).

Concerning risks, teachers have identified unpredictability as one risk of using CABP with autistic students (Doyle & Asbury, 2025). Although autistic students did not define this explicitly as a risk, they did identify that a benefit of traditional pedagogical approaches is their predictability. This, however, was not perceived to impact their likelihood of participating in CABP activities. Alongside this, teachers identified the challenges that autistic students may face due to the requirements for group-work and collaboration in CABP activities to be a risk associated with CABP participation; this perception was noted by the authors to be aligned with a corrective ideological framing of autism, as teachers were benchmarking autistic students against non-autistic social standards (Doyle & Asbury, 2025). The association between autism and social challenges is perhaps unsurprising given the characterisation of social difficulties in a formal diagnosis of autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013a) and existing research, including research collecting the perceptions of autistic individuals themselves (e.g., Trew, 2025).

While autistic students did not explicitly identify social demands as a risk, they reported that their social identity, which was understood as intrinsic to their autism, significantly impacted their engagement with CABP. For example, they reported difficulties working with others, putting themselves in someone else's shoes, and recognising facial expressions. This supports teachers' concerns about the social challenges autistic students may face in CABP (Doyle & Asbury, 2025). Moreover, the autistic students appeared to have

internalised a deficit based or corrective ideological framing of autism (Robinson & Crane, 2025), echoing the framing often adopted by teachers and other stakeholders in previous research (Doyle, Kim & Asbury, 2025). Participants appeared to frame their social challenges as individual difficulties, rather than challenges formed by a society which was not built for, or understanding of, their differences and needs (as described by the social model of disability; Oliver, 2013). This contrasts with the neurodiversity affirmative ontological framing of autism advocated by the neurodiversity paradigm (Shaw et al., 2024) and the broader autistic community in England (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021).

While these student perspectives of autism may not reflect those of the wider autistic community, they represent lived experiences that matter. The tension between the dominant community framing and the self-perceptions of autistic students merits further exploration, particularly as students themselves report that autism negatively affects their participation and perceptions in school activities.

5.4.1.2. A new perspective

While the above illustrates that some perceptions of autistic students were well aligned with existing research, this alignment was not unequivocal, particularly concerning risks associated with CABP participation. For example, alongside the aforementioned risks associated with the social requirements of CABP and its unpredictable nature, other risks identified in pre-existing research were the risk of overstimulation, the potential for that to result in dysregulation (Doyle, Kim & Asbury, 2025) and CABPs exposing nature. However, autistic participants in the current study did not identify these risks at all. Instead, autistic students perceived that CABP could be stressful, and that autistic students might take CABP too seriously. The latter of these findings is, perhaps, linked to autistic participants'

identification of perfectionism as a key aspect of their autistic self-identity, which they perceived to impact their perceptions of, and participation in CABP.

In total, eight new risks associated with CABP participation were identified by autistic participants. This is a substantial increase from the few which were previously identified by non-autistic stakeholders, perhaps due to the aforementioned positivity bias in the existing pool of research on autism and CAEPs such as CABP (Doyle, Kim & Asbury, 2025). The identification of a greater number of risks associated with CABP use demonstrates that the voices of autistic individuals in research are necessary to developing an authentic understanding of the autistic experience (Milton, 2014; Waldock & Keates, 2022).

It is perhaps no surprise that autistic individuals identified more risks associated with CABP implementation in mainstream secondary schools than non-autistic participants in previous research, as ultimately autistic individuals will best understand the impact that a pedagogical approach can have on autistic individuals (Shaw et al., 2024). This finding alone justifies the inclusion of autistic voices in research that impacts them, which could begin to address the existing epistemic injustice (Shaw et al., 2024) in the field. Alongside this, identification of a greater number of risks raises questions concerning the overall suitability of CABP in this context.

5.4.2. Overall suitability of CABP in this context

Based on the risks that autistic students have identified, perhaps the justification for CABP implementation with autistic students in mainstream secondary schools is not as cut-and-dried as previous research may imply.

5.4.2.1. CABP as a social constructivist learning space

One example of the potential unsuitability of CABP can be found in the definition of CABP itself. Previous research has defined CAEPs as social-emotionally oriented practices (Doyle, Kim & Asbury, 2025) and CABP as a social constructivist learning space (Doyle & Kim, 2025). This, perhaps, suggests that CABP would be unsuitable for autistic participants in the current study based on their previously discussed self-identification of socio-communicative challenges.

However, although nine out of 10 autistic participants reflected that these socio-communicative challenges impacted their perceptions of and participation in CABP, the benefits and risks which they identified as being associated with CABP, and the barriers and facilitators to CABP implementation in this context they mentioned, were not particularly linked to their social identity. So, two questions remain unanswered by the current research: Do the identified benefits of CABP offset the identified risks sufficiently to make it a useful approach?; and, do autistic students' self-identified socio-communicative challenges impact their perception of and/or participation in CABP to the extent that they do not reap the identified benefits of CABP?

5.4.2.2. Infrastructural barriers to implementation

Barriers and facilitators to CABP implementation identified by autistic participants were largely infrastructural, which raises questions concerning the suitability of CABP in a mainstream secondary school context. For example, barriers identified included too little space, the rigidity of the curriculum, and rigid school rules. Conversely, facilitators were: exposure to CABP (including in teacher training), more resources, smaller groups and more flexibility within the curriculum. As previous research has identified a significant number of

similar infrastructural barriers and facilitators to CABP implementation (e.g., Doyle & Kim, 2025; Doyle, Kim & Asbury, 2025; Doyle & Asbury, 2025), these factors could be considered the most influential. This was supported by autistic students who perceived that a lack of trust in teachers to facilitate lessons with pedagogical freedom to be substantial barriers. This, perhaps, speaks to a larger problem wherein teachers do not have the creative freedom to implement any innovative or novel pedagogical approaches.

However, autistic students did not identify any realistic ways in which such barriers could be overcome. Actionable next steps were also not identified by teachers, who simply suggested the inverse of their identified barriers (i.e., Barrier: large class sizes. Facilitator: smaller class sizes; Doyle & Asbury, 2025) Therefore, further research is needed to explore the ways in which educational infrastructure could be adapted to facilitate the implementation of CABP, or other innovative or novel pedagogical approaches more widely, when working with autistic students. Potentially a co-produced approach involving both teachers and autistic students would be the optimal way forward.

5.4.3. Gaps in research and recommendations for future research

Considering the above discussion, we have identified three remaining gaps in research and four recommendations for future research. First, we recommend that future research continues to include the voices of autistic adolescents in research which impacts and/or is important to them. In doing so, we can begin to address the evident epistemic injustice in existing research.

Our first identified gap in research concerns the conflict between the neurodiversity affirmative framing of autism, which is dominant in the community according to existing research, and the self-perceptions of autistic young people which are grounded in a deficit or

corrective ideological framing. We suggest that further research explores this tension, and considers how, and from where and who, autistic self-identity is formed. It would also perhaps be useful to explore whether the previously identified corrective ideological perceptions of autism held by teachers and other educational stakeholders impacts the way that autistic students see themselves, and the way they perceive and participate in CABP.

Our next identified gap in research concerns the overall suitability of CABP implementation. We suggest that future experimental and/or observational research explores the overall suitability of implementing CABP when working with autistic mainstream secondary school students in England. It would, perhaps, be useful to explore whether the identified benefits of CABP outweigh the identified risks in practice, or whether autistic students' self-identified socio-communicative challenges impact their perception of and/or participation in CABP to the extent that they do not reap the identified benefits.

Finally, we have identified that infrastructural barriers appear to be the most prevalent in preventing CABP implementation with autistic students in mainstream secondary schools. Teachers and other educational stakeholders in pre-existing research also identified educational infrastructure as the biggest barrier to pedagogical innovation. With that in mind, perhaps it would be valuable to conduct research which explores the ways in which educational infrastructures can be overcome to encourage pedagogical innovation.

6. CABP manifesto

Across Studies Two and Three, I gathered the perceptions of both teachers and autistic students in mainstream secondary schools on CABP, and the factors that may facilitate or hinder its use with autistic students. Insights from these stakeholders informed the design of two CABP Manifestos: one aimed at policymakers and another at educators.

After developing a large list of action points based on the data I had collected in my empirical studies, I sought formal and informal feedback from experts by experience. I began by consulting two mainstream secondary school teachers, inviting their feedback on the proposed action points for inclusion in the CABP Manifesto. During a Zoom meeting, we discussed whether the action points rang true for them, and which points they considered most important. Their feedback directly shaped the final selection and framing of the manifesto's action points.

The three key action points for policy makers, identified based on the findings from studies Two and Three as well as consultation with two mainstream secondary school teachers, were:

1. Equip teachers with knowledge and skills in inclusive pedagogies, including CABP, through initial training and continuous professional development.
2. Fund or prioritise research aimed at addressing infrastructural barriers to implementing inclusive pedagogies, including CABP.
3. Support the development of an open-access platform which will house guidance and examples to support teachers in implementing CABP with autistic students in their practice.

The three action points for an audience of educators, identified based on the findings from studies Two and Three as well as consultation with two mainstream secondary school teachers, were:

1. Critically think about your own understanding of autism and how that understanding impacts the way you work with autistic students. For example, think about how your understanding of autism impacts your pedagogical choices.
2. Explore the balanced implementation of creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP) in your classroom by looking through your long and short-term plans; consider in which of your lessons CABP may be an appropriate pedagogical approach and start there.
3. To express interest in getting involved in the co-production of an open-access platform which will house CABP-associated resources, activity examples, data and evidence, email me at: kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk

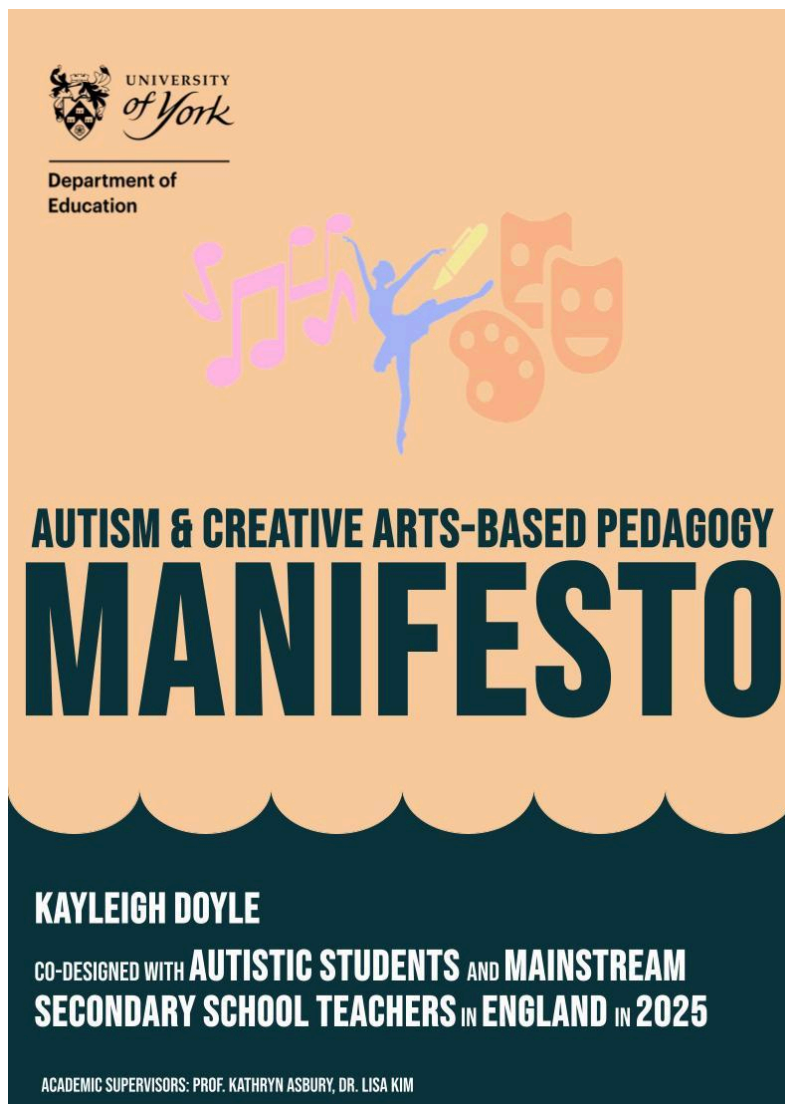
Once these key action points had been finalised with teachers, I contacted the ten autistic secondary school students who had participated in Study Three. The following email excerpt outlines the invitation for feedback:

[...] Based on your valuable contributions to my study (as well as the contributions of a group of teachers), I have drafted key action points for two creative arts-based pedagogy manifestos! [...] I welcome any feedback that you may have (good, bad or otherwise!) on the action points. Please feel free to share any feedback, thoughts, questions, concerns etc. via email (kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk), or if you would like to arrange a phone or Zoom call, do let me know. You are not required to provide feedback, but it is important to me that your voices are at the centre of the manifesto,

therefore any feedback you can provide will ensure that is the case as much as possible.

Participants were given three weeks to respond if they wished. Only one autistic student replied, offering brief but positive feedback: “Looks great!”. Based on this stage of design, I developed a first draft of the policy maker (see *Section 6.1*) and educator (see *Section 6.2*) CABP Manifestos.

6.1. Version one for policy makers



SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION

PEDAGOGY is concerned with how a teacher teaches (Lawson, 2013), so **CREATIVE ARTS-BASED PEDAGOGY (CABP)** can be defined as **HOW A TEACHER USES THE CREATIVE ARTS TO TEACH**.

For example, teachers may use a **HOT SEATING ACTIVITY** (i.e., Andrews et al., 2021) or **LEARNING THROUGH SONG** (Kumar et al., 2022) to teach students curricular content.

CABP could be considered a useful approach for **ALLEVIATING ENVIRONMENTAL BARRIERS** and **SUPPORTING AUTISTIC STUDENTS TO ACHIEVE AND THRIVE** (Department for Education, 2025) in education.

For example, CABP has been identified as **INCLUSIVE** due to its **SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST, INTERACTIVE, COLLABORATIVE AND MULTI-MODAL APPROACH** (Doyle, Kim & Asbury, 2025).

CABPs have also been considered **NEURODIVERSITY AFFIRMATIVE SPACES** (Hogle, 2021) which are **TAILORABLE TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS** (White 2011), with a **FOCUS ON PROCESS OVER OUTCOME** (Doyle & Kim, 2025).

Finally, CABP reportedly **PROVIDES THE SCAFFOLDS OF A SAFE SPACE** for autistic individuals in a mainstream secondary school context, according to teacher participants in Kehl (2021).

These are all **QUALITIES WHICH ARE INHERENT WITH OTHER MORE FREQUENTLY RESEARCHED INCLUSIVE APPROACHES** which are designed to meet the needs of a wide range of students (Ralabate, 2011).

AUTISM & CREATIVE ARTS-BASED PEDAGOGY MANIFESTO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SO, we gathered the perceptions of both teachers and autistic students in mainstream secondary schools regarding creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP), and the factors that may support or hinder its use with autistic young people. This was carried out through two separate studies. The insights from these stakeholders were then used to co-produce this CABP Manifesto, which outlines **three actionable next steps**:

1. EQUIP TEACHERS WITH KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS IN INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGIES, INCLUDING CABP, THROUGH INITIAL TRAINING AND CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

2. FUND OR PRIORITISE RESEARCH AIMED AT ADDRESSING INFRASTRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGIES, INCLUDING CABP

3. SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN OPEN-ACCESS PLATFORM

EQUIP TEACHERS WITH KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS THROUGH INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING AND CONTINUED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Students felt that **TEACHERS SHOULD RECEIVE TRAINING ON HOW TO USE CABP**: “I think **THEY SHOULD TRAIN TEACHERS MORE ON HOW TO USE THIS**... teaching teachers about the benefits of the techniques and how to practice them”.

A teacher also reflected: **“WHEN I TRAINED, THAT’S WHAT THE PGCE FOCUSED ON**, different pedagogical approaches and the theory behind them. **BUT NOT EVERYONE TRAINS THAT WAY ANYMORE”**.

Teachers noted that training during **THE “CREATIVE DECADE” [STARTING CIRCA 1999] BETTER EQUIPPED EDUCATORS WITH THE SKILLS NEEDED TO FACILITATE CREATIVE PEDAGOGIES**.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Develop both initial teacher education and continued professional development frameworks to support educators in their applied understanding of inclusive pedagogies, including CABP.

FUND OR PRIORITISE RESEARCH AIMED AT ADDRESSING INFRASTRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGIES, INCLUDING CABP

Teachers and students alike identified a range of **INFRASTRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING CABP**, with autistic students, including **LARGE CLASS SIZES, LIMITED TIME, INSUFFICIENT FUNDING, RESTRICTED ACCESS TO RESOURCES, INFLEXIBLE CURRICULA, AND EXAM PRESSURES.**

Teachers in particular stressed the need for **FURTHER RESEARCH EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURES ON PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION** more widely:

“I’d like **AS MUCH NOISE AS POSSIBLE** about how the **INFRASTRUCTURE AND SYSTEMS ARE FAILING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE**. Backed by research, that message could be powerful”.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Co-produce and disseminate practical guidance and resources to support teachers in implementing CABP with autistic students in mainstream secondary settings. These materials should be made easily accessible and should be designed to enhance teacher confidence and capacity in applying CABP effectively in inclusive classrooms.

OPEN-ACCESS PLATFORM DEVELOPMENT

Finally, both autistic students and teachers suggested that **GREATER ACCESS TO RESOURCES** about autism and CABP could enable teachers to facilitate CABP more effectively. One student suggested that: **“MORE RESOURCES [SHOULD BE] AVAILABLE TO THEM”**.

Teachers echoed this, expressed a desire for: **“CONCRETE EXAMPLES** [so as to] not have to think of ideas” themselves, along with **“DATA AND EVIDENCE** of how this supports and encourages” autistic students.

One teacher proposed that the most valuable next step would be an **OPEN-ACCESS PLATFORM** containing:

“WELL-RESEARCHED ACTIVITIES EMBEDDED INTO SCHEMES OF WORK”.

This has directly influenced a future research project. To express interest in getting involved in the co-production of an open-access platform which will house CABP-associated resources, activity examples, data and evidence,

email me at: **KAYLEIGH.DOYLE@YORK.AC.UK**

**HOW WAS THE
MANIFESTO
DEVELOPED?**

METHODS

We gathered the perceptions of both teachers and autistic students in mainstream secondary schools regarding CABP, and the factors that may support or hinder its use with autistic young people. This was carried out through two separate studies. Insights from stakeholders were used to co-produce this CABP Manifesto, which outlines actionable next steps.

METHODS:

Qualitative Questionnaire Study

Qualitative Interview Study

PARTICIPANTS:

Mainstream Secondary School Teachers

Autistic Mainstream Secondary School Students


ANALYSIS:

Inductive Content Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis


CABP MANIFESTO

6.2. Version one for educators



UNIVERSITY
of York

Department of
Education



AUTISM & CREATIVE ARTS-BASED PEDAGOGY MANIFESTO

KAYLEIGH DOYLE

CO-DESIGNED WITH **AUTISTIC STUDENTS** AND **MAINSTREAM
SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS** IN ENGLAND IN 2025

ACADEMIC SUPERVISORS: PROF. KATHRYN ASBURY, DR. LISA KIM

AUTISM & CREATIVE ARTS-BASED PEDAGOGY MANIFESTO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. CRITICALLY THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM and how that understanding impacts the way you work with autistic students. For example, **THINK ABOUT HOW YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM IMPACTS YOUR PEDAGOGICAL CHOICES.**

2. Explore the balanced implementation of creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP) in your classroom by looking through your long and short-term plans, **CONSIDER IN WHICH OF YOUR LESSONS CABP MAY BE AN APPROPRIATE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH** and start there.

3. To express interest in getting involved in the co-production of an open-access platform which will house CABP-associated resources, activity examples, data and evidence,

email me at: **KAYLEIGH.DOYLE@YORK.AC.UK**

AUTISM & CREATIVE ARTS-BASED PEDAGOGY

MANIFESTO

DEFINITION OF CABP

PEDAGOGY is concerned with how a teacher teaches (Lawson, 2013), so **CREATIVE ARTS-BASED PEDAGOGY (CABP)** can be defined as **HOW A TEACHER USES THE CREATIVE ARTS TO TEACH**. For example, teachers may use a **HOT SEATING ACTIVITY** (i.e., Andrews et al., 2021) or **LEARNING THROUGH SONG** (Kumar et al., 2022) to teach students curricular content.

CRITICALLY CONSIDER YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM 1/3

An understanding of autism doesn't explain what autism is, but it helps us decide what questions we ask about autism and how we think about the answers.

A **PATHOLOGY-FOCUSED UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM** considers autistic people to have “deficits” or “problems” that need fixing, and does not consider society or the environment to impact the autistic experience.

A **NEURODIVERSITY-AFFIRMATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM** considers autistic people to be “different” rather than “deficient”, and focuses on wellbeing and removing social barriers to education instead of trying to “fix” the individual.

EVERYONE (including autistic individuals themselves) **HAS AN UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM**, albeit consciously or subconsciously.

Autistic individuals in England reportedly prefer a neurodiversity-affirmative understanding of autism (Bottema–Beutel et al. 2024).

CRITICALLY CONSIDER YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM 2/3

AS A TEACHER, YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM IMPACTS THE WAYS IN WHICH AUTISTIC STUDENTS EXPERIENCE THEIR TIME IN YOUR CLASSROOM.

In my research, teachers identified that autistic students experience, for example, social difficulties in school. Teachers suggested that **THESE SOCIAL DIFFICULTIES MIGHT MAKE IT HARD FOR AUTISTIC STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN CABP.**

Autistic students similarly **DESCRIBED THEIR SOCIAL SKILLS AS IF THEY WERE IMPAIRMENTS**, and **EXPLICITLY ASSOCIATED THEIR SOCIAL DIFFICULTIES WITH BEING AUTISTIC.**

THESE ACCOUNTS ECHO THE LONGSTANDING DISCOURSES IN AUTISM RESEARCH which position autistic social functioning as a “deficit”, rather than a mutual problem (Milton, 2012), wherein autistic and non-autistic individuals alike struggle to understand each other.

CRITICALLY CONSIDER YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM 3/3

We were surprised that autistic students had a pathology-focussed understanding of autism when discussing their social skills.

But, **IT IS POSSIBLE THAT AUTISTIC STUDENTS EXPERIENCE “INTERNALISED STIGMA”** (Den Houting et al., 2021), whereby negative societal beliefs are absorbed into one’s self-concept following repeated exposure.

IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE THAT EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS MIGHT BE CONTRIBUTING TO THE REPRODUCTION OF A PATHOLOGY- FOCUSED UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM.

So, consider **CRITICALLY THINKING ABOUT YOUR OWN UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM** and how that understanding of autism impacts your practice when working with autistic students. For example, **THINK ABOUT HOW YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM IMPACTS YOUR PEDAGOGICAL CHOICES.**

BALANCE IS KEY 1/2

Overall, both teachers and students agreed that **CABP SHOULD BE IMPLEMENTED**, but recognised **THE IMPORTANCE OF BALANCE**, particularly when working with autistic students.

Students expressed that **THEY WOULD NOT WANT CABP IN EVERY LESSON**, as it could become **ANNOYING** and may **NOT ALWAYS BE APPROPRIATE** based on the lesson content.

Teachers reflected that **CABP IS VALUABLE FOR DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS** such as teamwork, but cautioned that **CREATIVITY CAN SOMETIMES OVERSHADOW CORE LEARNING**.

For example, one maths teacher remembered using chocolate in an activity to demonstrate fractions; a year later, they reflected that **STUDENTS VIVIDLY REMEMBERED THE CHOCOLATE, BUT MANY STILL STRUGGLED TO GET THE FRACTIONS RIGHT**.

BALANCE IS KEY 2/2

Teachers noted that **UNPREDICTABILITY AND THE SOCIAL DEMANDS OF GROUP WORK COULD POSE CHALLENGES** when facilitating CABP with autistic students, and autistic students highlighted that **PREDICTABLE STRUCTURES HELPED THEM FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE AND ABLE TO PARTICIPATE MEANINGFULLY IN CABP ACTIVITIES.**

This further suggests that **CABP SHOULD BE FACILITATED, WITH CAUTION AND BALANCE.**

CABP facilitation should be **CAREFULLY PLANNED** and **SCAFFOLDED TO SUPPORT THE NEEDS OF AUTISTIC LEARNERS.**

So, consider exploring the balanced implementation of creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP) in your classroom by looking through your long and short-term plans, **CONSIDER IN WHICH OF YOUR LESSONS CABP MAY BE AN APPROPRIATE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH** and start there.

OPEN-ACCESS PLATFORM DEVELOPMENT

Finally, both autistic students and teachers suggested that **GREATER ACCESS TO RESOURCES** about autism and CABP could enable teachers to facilitate CABP more effectively. One student suggested that: **“MORE RESOURCES [SHOULD BE] AVAILABLE TO THEM”**.

Teachers echoed this, expressed a desire for: **“CONCRETE EXAMPLES** [so as to] not have to think of ideas” themselves, along with **“DATA AND EVIDENCE** of how this supports and encourages” autistic students.

One teacher proposed that the most valuable next step would be an **OPEN-ACCESS PLATFORM** containing:

“WELL-RESEARCHED ACTIVITIES EMBEDDED INTO SCHEMES OF WORK”.

This has directly influenced a future research project. To express interest in getting involved in the co-production of an open-access platform which will house CABP-associated resources, activity examples, data and evidence,

email me at: **KAYLEIGH.DOYLE@YORK.AC.UK**

6.3 Finalising the CABP manifestos

Once the first versions of the manifestos had been designed, I sought feedback from relevant professionals. They were asked to comment on what worked well and what could be improved, with the aim of ensuring that each manifesto was appropriately tailored to its intended audience. For the policymaker manifesto, I consulted the York Policy Engine. Their feedback focused on making the document more concise by reducing repetition and overall length. They recommended condensing the manifesto to two pages from eight: the first outlining the background and key policy recommendations, and the second offering more detailed content such as quotes, methods, or additional details about the research findings. They also provided a rough template and suggested ending the document with a link to my email address, inviting policymakers to contact me if they wished to learn more. The York Policy Engine further recommended several channels for disseminating the manifesto, including relevant All-Party Parliamentary Groups and direct emails to MPs. See *Section 6.4* for the current CABP Manifesto for policymakers.

For the educator manifesto, I consulted a teacher educator based at the University of York who specialises in whole-school initiatives and the connections between schools, communities, and society. Their feedback similarly focused on streamlining the manifesto by reducing repetition and overall length. They recommended presenting concise action points on a single page and simplifying the call to action by replacing the email address with a QR code linking to a short form, encouraging quicker responses. They also suggested restructuring the manifesto to highlight its relevance to teachers upfront, with explanations and supporting evidence moving to later in the manifesto. Specifically, they suggested: “it may be worth highlighting the new Ofsted framework focus on inclusion to hook interest”. Using this feedback, I developed the current version of the CABP manifesto for teachers.

Although this version is significantly shorter and less detailed than the first version the professional consultant reflected: “I know this feels like it unpicks your great work, and it is visually appealing, but short, sharp ‘Are you interested?’ followed by a quick form is more likely to get traction”. The professional also advised on avenues of dissemination, including via a large weekly email to 40 schools in the local area. See *Section 6.5* for the current CABP Manifesto for educators.

6.4 The policy maker CABP Manifesto

AUTISM & CREATIVE ARTS-BASED PEDAGOGY
MANIFESTO
 KAYLEIGH DOYLE CO-DESIGNED WITH AUTISTIC STUDENTS AND MAINSTREAM
 SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN ENGLAND

SUMMARY

- Many students, including autistic students in mainstream schools, are not receiving the support they need to thrive.
- Changing this is especially important now, as the 2025 Ofsted framework will place inclusion and special educational needs at the centre of inspections.
- Research shows that creative, multi-modal approaches, such as creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP), can help autistic students communicate, participate, and build confidence.
- So, we explored teachers’ and autistic students’ perspectives on CABP, including factors that support or hinder its use.
- These insights shaped the co-production of this CABP Manifesto, which sets out three clear, actionable recommendations for policy:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY

1. EQUIP TEACHERS WITH KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS IN INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGIES, INCLUDING CABP, THROUGH INITIAL TRAINING AND CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.
2. FUND OR PRIORITISE RESEARCH AIMED AT ADDRESSING INFRASTRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGIES, INCLUDING CABP
3. SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN OPEN-ACCESS PLATFORM

AUTISM & CREATIVE ARTS-BASED PEDAGOGY MANIFESTO

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS (CONT.)

EQUIP TEACHERS WITH KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS THROUGH INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING AND CONTINUED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Students felt that **TEACHERS SHOULD RECEIVE TRAINING ON HOW TO USE CABP**: "I think **THEY SHOULD TRAIN TEACHERS MORE ON HOW TO USE THIS...** teaching teachers about the benefits of the techniques and how to practice them".

A teacher also reflected: "**WHEN I TRAINED, THAT'S WHAT THE PGCE FOCUSED ON**, different pedagogical approaches and the theory behind them. **BUT NOT EVERYONE TRAINS THAT WAY ANYMORE**".

Teachers noted that training during **THE "CREATIVE DECADE" [STARTING CIRCA 1999] BETTER EQUIPPED EDUCATORS WITH THE SKILLS NEEDED TO FACILITATE CREATIVE PEDAGOGIES**.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION:

Develop both initial teacher education and continued professional development frameworks to support educators in their applied understanding of inclusive pedagogies, including CABP.

FUND OR PRIORITISE RESEARCH AIMED AT ADDRESSING INFRASTRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGIES, INCLUDING CABP

Teachers and students alike identified a range of **INFRASTRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING CABP**, with autistic students, including **LARGE CLASS SIZES, LIMITED TIME, INFLEXIBLE CURRICULA, AND EXAM PRESSURES**.

Teachers in particular stressed the need for **FURTHER RESEARCH EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF EDUCATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURES ON PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION** more widely:

"I'd like **AS MUCH NOISE AS POSSIBLE** about how the **INFRASTRUCTURE AND SYSTEMS ARE FAILING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE**. Backed by research, that message could be powerful".

POLICY RECOMMENDATION:

Co-produce and disseminate practical guidance and resources to support teachers in implementing CABP with autistic students in mainstream secondary settings. These materials should be made easily accessible and should be designed to enhance teacher confidence and capacity in applying CABP effectively in inclusive classrooms.

OPEN-ACCESS PLATFORM DEVELOPMENT

Finally, both autistic students and teachers suggested that **GREATER ACCESS TO RESOURCES** about autism and CABP could enable teachers to facilitate CABP more effectively. One student suggested that: "**MORE RESOURCES [SHOULD BE] AVAILABLE TO THEM**".

Teachers echoed this, expressed a desire for: "**CONCRETE EXAMPLES** [so as to] not have to think of ideas" themselves, along with "**DATA AND EVIDENCE** of how this supports and encourages" autistic students.

One teacher proposed that the most valuable next step would be an **OPEN-ACCESS PLATFORM** containing:

"WELL-RESEARCHED ACTIVITIES EMBEDDED INTO SCHEMES OF WORK".

This has directly influenced a future research project. To express interest in getting involved

email me at:
KAYLEIGH.DOYLE@YORK.AC.UK

Ready to learn more or to help make these recommendations a reality? Email me at:

KAYLEIGH.DOYLE@YORK.AC.UK

AUTISM & CREATIVE ARTS-BASED PEDAGOGY MANIFESTO

The Department for Education, the Children's Commissioner, and existing research all highlight a growing concern: many students, including autistic students in mainstream schools, are not receiving the support they need to thrive. This is especially important now, as the 2025 Ofsted framework will place inclusion and special educational needs at the centre of inspections.

Research shows that creative, multi-modal approaches, such as creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP), can help autistic students communicate, participate, and build confidence. So, we explored teachers' and autistic students' perspectives on CABP, including factors that support or hinder its use.

These insights shaped the co-design of this CABP Manifesto, which sets out three clear, actionable next steps:

1. CRITICALLY CONSIDER YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM

2. CONSIDER IN WHICH OF YOUR LESSONS CABP MAY BE AN APPROPRIATE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

3. OPEN ACCESS PLATFORM DEVELOPMENT

**READY TO LEARN MORE OR TO HELP
MAKE THESE ACTIONS A REALITY?**

FOLLOW THIS LINK:

If you submit an expression of interest, a more detailed overview of each action point will be provided.



6.6 Summary

The chapter outlines the development and design of two autism and CABP manifestos, one for policymakers and one for educators, designed to support more inclusive practice for autistic students in mainstream secondary schools. The manifestos present clear action points: improving teacher training in inclusive pedagogies, funding research to address infrastructural barriers, developing an open-access resource platform, encouraging educators to reflect on their understanding of autism, and supporting balanced implementation of CABP. Recommended next steps and key priorities based on the CABP manifesto will be discussed in *Section 7.5. The CABP Manifesto: Looking to the future.*

7. Discussion

7.1. Introduction

This discussion synthesises the overall findings of this doctoral thesis, based on the outcomes of the three studies reported in *Chapters 3-5*. These studies consolidated research at the intersection of autism and CABP within a novel paradigmatic framework, a neurodiversity paradigm, and sought the perceptions of teachers and autistic students on CABP. Study One identified that epistemic injustice, pathology-focused ontologies of autism and a positivity bias had framed extant research (Doyle, Kim & Asbury, 2025) and Studies Two and Three represent attempts to begin to redress this balance. This discussion is centred around three key points: (1) perceptions of autism and CABP; (2) CABP as a safe/brave space; (3) should CABP be implemented? This chapter ends by discussing the limitations of the research presented in this thesis, remaining gaps in research and recommendations for future research. When considering the latter, the *CABP Manifesto* developed as an outcome of the studies presented here will be discussed.

7.2 Perceptions

7.2.1. *Perceptions of autism*

In the introduction to this thesis, I outlined the dominant ontologies that have existed since Kanner's seminal definition of autism (Kanner, 1943). Rather than a pathology-focused ontology, a neurodiversity affirmative ontology of autism was identified as the preference of the autistic community in England (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2024). However, the findings from the studies presented in this thesis indicated that the perceptions of both teachers (Studies 1 and 2) and autistic students (Study 3) did not neatly align with this neurodiversity-affirmative ontology.

When discussing the potential benefits and risks associated with CABP, teachers in Study Two tended to express the view that aligning autistic students' behaviour with allistic norms was a benefit of CABP. Further, several teachers explicitly identified social communication difficulties as a rationale for excluding autistic students from such activities. For example, one teacher noted: “[f]or students with autism, social barriers are one of the main challenges they face”. This perception mirrors the DSM-5’s definition of autism, which continues to frame social communication differences as an “impairment” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013a). Other teachers elaborated on this perceived risk: “Some autistic students [...] throw themselves into it but don’t have the awareness of social context and so can say inappropriate things or get into a situation where other students mock them”. Teachers considered such risks to be particularly prevalent in CABP, given the collaborative demands that characterise this approach, with one remarking that the “lack of social cues [in my autistic students] can be problematic in the group work”. These statements collectively illustrated how teachers’ understandings of autism appear to be often aligned with a pathology-focused ontology of autism, within which the success of autistic students is evaluated according to their ability to conform with allistic behavioural norms.

Pre-existing research supports these findings. For example, in the systematic review presented in *Chapter 3*, parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of autism had an overarching focus on autistic students’ social functioning, and autistic social functioning was generally considered to be a disadvantage. Further, seminal accounts of autism, generally written by allistic academics, have explored the concept of autistic social skills. Kanner’s (1943) seminal account, for example, suggested that a deficit in sociality was central to the condition; when describing an autistic individual, Kanner posited that autistic individuals “behaved as if people as such did not matter or even exist” (p. 228).

Building on Kanner's research, researchers have developed cognitive theories which centre their understanding of autism around social deficits. Perhaps the most influential of these is the Theory of Mind (ToM) hypothesis (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985) which suggests that autistic individuals lack the ability to attribute mental states to others (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985; Frith & Happé, 1994). More recent dominant accounts of autism have developed rather than refuted the ToM hypothesis. For example, social motivation theory suggests that autistic individuals' reduced motivation to engage socially explains their perceived challenges with social functioning (Chevallier et al., 2012). Collectively, pathology-focused theories and ontologies of autism have provided the framework within which teachers' perceptions are, perhaps, situated. Teachers' professional understanding of autism often derives from training materials, policy documents, and interventions that are themselves informed by the dominant ontological discourse (Dwyer, 2022b). Therefore, it perhaps makes sense that the ontological assumptions of teachers reflect the pathology-focused ontology of autism that is dominant in both educational and clinical discourse, and may also explain why teachers appear to conceptualise autistic social functioning as a barrier, risk, or deficit - a problem to be fixed - rather than a value-neutral difference.

The perceptions articulated by autistic students similarly reflected elements of these pathology-focused accounts, lending partial support to teachers' concerns. For example, nine of the 10 autistic student participants described their social skills as if they were impairments, and explicitly associated social challenges with being autistic. One student reflected: "I'm pretty sure [autism] definitely limits my social interactions and bits, like I don't quite pick up on like social cues, I've been told. Yeah. And I find it a bit hard to like, tell when someone's really upset or something". Other students expressed comparable experiences, citing difficulties with perspective-taking and recognising facial expressions. These accounts echo the aforementioned longstanding discourses in autism research that position social

functioning as an autistic deficit (Baron-Cohen, 1989, 1991; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). Further, the autistic students' accounts arguably provide empirical backing for teachers' concerns about the challenges autistic students may face in collaborative, social constructivist and group-based pedagogical contexts such as CABP.

7.2.1.1. Pathology-focused ontologies and autistic self-identity in education

Although a neurodiversity-affirmative ontology of autism is increasingly recognised as the preferred framing within the autistic community (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2024), and is also my own ontological position, this does not invalidate the pathology-focused first-person experiences reported here by autistic students. Rather, these accounts highlight the powerful influence of dominant ontological discourse in shaping not only allistic perceptions of autism, but also how autistic people come to understand themselves. Further, autistic students' accounts illustrate the ways in which autistic self-identity is shaped by environments which appear to be aligned with a pathology-focused ontology of autism (Botha & Frost, 2020).

A reason for the persistence of autistic students' pathology-focused self-identity could be the poor dissemination of more recent ontological developments in autism research to autistic students, their parents, their teachers and other educational stakeholders (Dwyer, 2022b). For example, Milton's (2012) "double empathy problem" theory is a widely cited and dominant (in academic circles) neurodiversity affirmative counter-argument to the pathology-focused ToM hypothesis (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985); it challenges the long-standing idea that autistic social functioning is inherently deficient. Instead, it argues that social difficulties arise from reciprocal misunderstandings between autistic and allistic individuals. Yet, as evidenced by this project's systematic review and teacher questionnaire study, the perceptions of teachers and other educational stakeholders appear to remain grounded in a pathology-focused ontology of autism, and reporting on CAEP-associated

benefits and risks reinforces this framework. As a result, autistic individuals continue to be considered in such a way in practice, even though the autistic community itself advocates for neurodiversity-affirmative alternatives (Botha & Frost, 2020; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2024).

The long-term impact of this pathology-focused discourse on autistic individuals can potentially be understood through the lens of internalised stigma (den Houting et al., 2021). Humphrey and Lewis (2008) documented how autistic students in mainstream secondary schools experienced stigma in ways that undermine their autistic self-identity. Den Houting et al. (2021) later conceptualised this process as “internalised stigma”, whereby repeated exposure to negative societal messages about autism become absorbed into an individual’s self-concept. Within education and research, this process is particularly powerful because teachers hold institutional authority and researchers hold epistemic authority. Therefore, perhaps both play a central role in shaping how students view themselves. For example, if teachers are aligned with pathology-focused ontologies of autism, they risk passing on these ontological framings to their autistic students, thereby reinforcing a pathology-focused self-concept (Dwyer, 2022b; Humphrey & Symes, 2013). In this way, students’ pathology-focused accounts may not simply be an expression of their lived experience but a reflection of dominant ideologies communicated to them by authority figures.

An example of the potential impact of internalised stigma on autistic students’ perceptions of autism can be seen in the account of Participant 3. When discussing the social difficulties they experienced within CABP, they recite messaging that has been relayed to them by others: “I don't quite pick up on like social cues, I've been told” (P3). They similarly reflect on being told that their discomfort with being in the spotlight is “kind of related to [being autistic].” Although it is not clear who told them that they struggle with social cues or that being autistic explains their reluctance to be centre stage, it is evident from their repetition of the phrase “I have been told” that these ideas originate from outside themselves

and have since been internalised. This pattern, however, was not consistent across all participants. Indeed, it is important to recognise that some autistic students may have offered pathology-focused accounts that were simply accurate reflections of their lived experience. Participant 4, for instance, acknowledged that, because they are autistic, they sometimes find it difficult to recognise facial expressions which made participation in CABP challenging at times. P4 described this not as a judgement about autism, but as a practical difficulty that occasionally limited their confidence during activities. This account illustrates how an acknowledgement of autism-associated challenge can emerge from lived experience rather than from internalised deficit-based messaging.

It is also important to consider the developmental stage of the participating students. Adolescence and early adulthood are key periods for forming a sense of identity (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018; Potterton et al., 2022), and autistic young people may feel strong social pressures to conform to typical expectations. This could amplify the influence of pathology-focused messages on how autistic students see themselves (Murray et al., 2019).

Autistic students' narratives were not entirely deficit-focused in Study Three. Alongside reports of social challenges and self-perceived impairments, many students also articulated views that are more consistent with a neurodiversity-affirmative ontology. For example, some described autism as making them "different" rather than "disordered" and resisted the notion that autism defined the totality of their identity. Several emphasised the heterogeneity of autistic experience, noting that they could only speak to their own lives and not for all autistic people. These accounts demonstrated that autistic students' self-perceptions are complex, shaped by an interplay of the pathology-focused dominant discourses and, in part, their resistance to them (Botha et al., 2023; Underhill et al., 2024), as well as their first-person experience. Autistic students' narratives appear to reflect what might be described as a dual ontological positionality; while internalised stigma and first-person

experiences are perhaps leading autistic participants to frame aspects of themselves (i.e., their social identity) within a pathology-focused ontological framework (Alhusayni et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2023), they simultaneously hold neurodiversity-affirming perceptions of other aspects of their identity (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019; Kiblen et al., 2024).

One possible explanation for autistic students' dual ontological positionality is that schools often implement 'neurodiversity-lite' approaches (Dwyer et al., 2025), which acknowledge neurodivergence in name but do not fully challenge underlying pathology-focused assumptions. Such approaches promote tolerance of difference while continuing to frame autism in terms of limitations or risks (Dwyer et al., 2025; Ezerins et al., 2025), potentially explaining why teachers and autistic students recognize autistic differences yet still conceptualize those differences as obstacles within activities like CABP.

The complexity of simultaneously framing some aspects of autistic self-identity through a pathology-focused lens while holding neurodiversity-affirming views of other aspects invites reflection on the implications of adopting a neurodiversity-affirmative paradigm as the central theoretical framework of this thesis. Such complexities indicate that autistic students are perhaps navigating contradictory discourses and absorbing pathology-focused framings from one angle while also resisting these framings from another angle. Despite its identified prevalence, little research has explored whether and how internalised stigma, neurodiversity-lite practices or their stage of life may impact autistic students' educational experiences. Addressing this gap, by focusing on the ontologies of autism that are presented to autistic students (albeit consciously or sub-consciously) by school staff, would not only deepen understanding of the tensions in autistic self-perception but also explore how educational environments might be contributing to the reproduction of pathology-focused ontologies of autism. Further, if educators were more intentional in communicating neurodiversity-affirmative ontologies of autism, we could begin to explore

whether the persistence of pathology-focused self-concept reflects students' genuine lived experience or the cumulative effect of internalised stigma from a dominant pathology-focused ontology of autism.

7.2.2. Perceptions of autism and their impact on autistic students' perceptions of, and participation in CABP

Social difficulties, as identified by autistic students and mainstream secondary school teachers, were perceived to impact autistic students' perceptions of, and participation in, CABP. This finding is novel, as it has not previously been explored in research. For example, teachers suggested that students may struggle with the performative elements of CABP, such as having to present to the class: "Many of the autistic students [...] who I have taught in the past have stated that they are uncomfortable with activities that might place them in a situation where they have to verbalise what they think and feel". This was supported by an autistic student who reflected on their struggles with being in the spotlight: "I've been told that the whole me not liking being in the spotlight stuff is kind of related to [being autistic]. I'm not quite as good at getting things across sometimes, or might speak too fast in comparison to my classmates". Teachers noted that due to the exposing nature of CABP, autistic students "may be reluctant to get involved or to join in publicly in class".

Further, teachers were concerned that the group work and collaboration required in CABP could be challenging for their autistic students; one suggested that "some autistic students also throw themselves into it but don't have the awareness of social context and so can say inappropriate things or get into a situation where other students mock them". This was seen to be particularly difficult for those who "have previously had friendship issues". Autistic students also supported this, reflecting that "you have to communicate with people more [in CABP than traditional pedagogical approaches] which can be more difficult". This

perception was supported by another student who noted: “I also don't like working in teams with people who, like doing teamwork, with people I haven't chosen”.

Although, here, teachers and autistic students appear to be aligned in the perceived negative impact of autistic social functioning on CABP participation, neither of the groups of participants implied that autistic students should be excluded from CABP entirely, or that CABP should not be implemented in a mainstream secondary school context. On the contrary, both teachers and autistic students supported the implementation of CABP in mainstream secondary school settings, while also identifying a range of associated benefits and risks concerning its implementation with autistic students.

7.2.3. Perceptions of benefits associated with CABP

Benefits associated with engaging in CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school students were identified by both teachers and autistic students. Perceived benefits were generally aligned with three key points that will be discussed in this section: (1) CABP and learning outcomes; (2) CABP is inclusive; and (3) CABP and personal development. Concerning the first two points, both teachers and autistic students were generally in agreement. However, there were perceptual differences between these two groups concerning the impact of CABP on autistic individuals' personal development.

7.2.3.1. CABP and educational outcomes

Autistic students and mainstream secondary school teachers agreed that CABP is an enjoyable pedagogical approach for autistic students. For example, students described their experience taking part in CABP activities as fun, engaging, and multi-sensory; teachers agreed, emphasising that CABP could make lessons more interactive and enjoyable for their students. This perceived benefit was directly linked to reports of CABP facilitating positive

educational outcomes, and improved retention of curricular content. For example, students suggested that their enjoyment of CABP was directly related to their educational outcomes and information retention: “[I remember] like, the fun bits.[...]”. This was supported by another student who reflected that they got their best mark on a piece of coursework which involved drawing and sketching: “that was where I got my best mark, because, yeah, it was lots of fun”.

The reported link between creativity, enjoyment, and retention resonates with longstanding educational theory which emphasises that active participation and emotional engagement are critical drivers of learning (Bruner, 1974; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Enjoyment is not, then, simply a by-product of CABP, but plays a cognitive role; positive emotions stimulate attention and motivation, thereby facilitating deeper processing and memory consolidation (Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). Neuroscientific evidence also underscores this connection, illustrating that novelty, play, and creativity activate dopaminergic pathways associated with reward and memory (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). In this sense, CABP appears to not only make lessons more enjoyable, but to also create the neurocognitive conditions within which information is more likely to be retained and retrieved.

Teachers also perceived CABP to support autistic students’ retention of information, as creative lessons were seen to be more noteworthy, so “students better remember and engage”. This perception was supported by autistic students, whose perceptions illustrate how CABP transformed abstract lesson content into tangible, embodied experiences (Fleming, 2010); in turn, this process supported the encoding and retrieval of curricular knowledge long after the lesson. This perception of teachers and autistic students is aligned with constructivist pedagogical perspectives, which argue that knowledge is more effectively internalised when it is experienced through multiple modalities (Kolb, 2014). CABP, by mobilising auditory,

visual, and kinaesthetic channels, was perceived to provide varied and flexible pathways into understanding; by contrast, traditional teaching methods often rely heavily on verbal explanation or text (Artemeva & Fox, 2011), privileging modes of instruction that may be less accessible to autistic learners.

The multimodality of CABP is pedagogically significant because multimodality has been shown to sustain attentional focus, reduce cognitive overload, and support working memory (Mayer, 2020). Further, it has been suggested that integrating creative practices into lessons fosters not only surface-level recall but also deeper conceptual understanding and the transfer of knowledge across contexts (Hardiman et al., 2019).

So, both teacher and student accounts, supported by pre-existing literature, suggest that CABP enhances autistic learners' information retention by transforming abstract concepts into embodied experiences. The multimodal, memorable and engaging nature of CABP not only sustains students' attention *in situ*, but also appears to support deeper, conceptual understanding of curricular content and longer-term knowledge retrieval. These findings illustrate a significant benefit of CABP in the education of autistic students.

However, it is not clear that these are benefits specific to an autistic population. In fact, neither teachers nor autistic students explicitly or implicitly linked this perception to autistic individuals. With that in-mind, in-line with other inclusive pedagogical approaches, perhaps CABP could be suitable for the wider student community, including all students who may find conventional instruction less effective. When considering a definition of inclusive pedagogy to be pedagogical reorientation (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012) away from teaching for "most and some" to teaching for "everybody" (Spratt & Florian, 2015), it would appear, then, that based on the perceptions of autistic students and mainstream secondary school teachers, CABP could be considered an inclusive pedagogical approach.

7.2.3.2. CABP is inclusive

The idea that CABP could be considered an inclusive pedagogical approach was supported by teachers and students. Teachers perceived that CABP facilitated access to challenging parts of the curriculum through its multi-modality. Autistic students supported this, suggesting that there is too much writing in traditional pedagogical approaches; CABP, by contrast, reportedly engaged the auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic learners, reflecting Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, which advocate multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to support diverse learner needs (CAST, 2024).

CABP was also valued for its adaptability to individual needs. Teachers highlighted its ability to allow for discrete differentiation, enabling autistic students to participate fully without feeling singled out, consistent with inclusive education principles of equitable access (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Students agreed that CABP's flexibility supported their personal learning preferences; for example, one student used emojis or colours instead of realistic faces to explore emotions, accommodating difficulties with facial emotion recognition.

Overall, CABP's multi-modal, flexible, and adaptable design suggests that it could be considered an inclusive pedagogical approach, from the perspectives of both teachers and autistic students. CABP was considered to provide equitable access, support diverse learning preferences, and enable personalised engagement in lesson content without stigmatising differentiation. Therefore, it continues to appear appropriate to consider CABP an inclusive pedagogical approach.

7.2.3.3. CABP and personal development

The final identified benefit of CABP was specific to autistic students' personal development, including improved confidence, communication, flexibility, and self-regulation. For example,

teachers described how CABP provided autistic students with a valuable means of non-verbal expression, allowing them to communicate their emotions and reveal their inner worlds. CABP was also widely recognised for supporting social skill development, with teachers emphasising that it facilitated interaction, teamwork, and understanding between autistic and neurotypical peers. One teacher described CABP as having the ability to “bridge the gap” between students. Beyond social benefits, CABP also helped develop self-confidence and self-esteem in autistic students, while encouraging them to consider multiple perspectives and think flexibly, supporting the development of empathy and social cognition.

Collectively and objectively, these observations indicate that CABP facilitates holistic personal development for autistic students, supporting emotional expression, social skills, self-confidence, perspective-taking, and imaginative growth through engaging, inclusive, and flexible creative activities. However, these perceptions are grounded in the aforementioned pathology-focused ontology of autism, positioning CABP as a way to address perceived autistic shortcomings, rather than as an opportunity to affirm diverse strengths. Interestingly, students did not identify these developmental benefits. Their accounts focused more on CABP’s enjoyable qualities, its potential to reduce stress, and its role in making lessons more memorable. One student, for instance, noted that creative lessons felt “less pressured” and gave freedom to experiment without fear of doing something “incorrectly.” This divergence further supports the aforementioned point that teachers perceive autistic students in-line with a pathology-focused ontology of autism, whilst autistic students' self-perceptions are more complex; their dual positionality tends to consider both pathology-focused and neurodiversity-affirmative points of view.

7.2.4. Perceptions of risks associated with CABP

Several risks associated with CABP when working with autistic mainstream secondary school students were identified across both participant groups. Teachers reported practical risks, including sensory overstimulation from elements such as noise, colour, and texture in art spaces, and emotional or behavioural dysregulation caused by the unpredictability and performative nature of drama activities. These risks were understood to be potentially overwhelming or disruptive for some students.

Autistic students identified a different set of risks, focusing more on the social and behavioural aspects of CABP. They described CABP as awkward, annoying, or distracting at times, and noted that CABP could encourage off-task behaviour, such as singing or joking, which disrupted their learning opportunities.

Overall, the identified risks associated with CABP ranged from sensory and environmental, to issues of classroom management and distraction. Previous research has primarily highlighted overstimulation as a concern, but the present findings expand this understanding to include social and behavioural risks within general classroom contexts.

7.2.5. Summary

In this section I have discussed perceptions of autism and the impact of CABP on autistic students in mainstream secondary schools. In the research presented in this thesis teachers' perceptions largely aligned with pathology-focused ontologies, framing autistic social functioning as a deficit and evaluating success according to conformity with allistic norms. These pathology-focused views were mirrored in autistic students' self-perceptions, with most student participants describing social challenges as impairments. However, students also expressed neurodiversity-affirmative perspectives, recognising autism as difference rather

than disorder, illustrating a dual or complex ontological positionality shaped, perhaps, by internalised stigma, resistance to pathology-focused framings, and their lived experiences.

Perceptions of CABP reflected these ontological positions. Teachers emphasised risks related to social interaction, performance, and sensory regulation, generally framing challenges as autism-specific, whereas students identified more general classroom frustrations. Benefits were also interpreted differently: teachers highlighted CABP's role in developing social skills, confidence, empathy, and perspective-taking, often through a corrective ideological (Robinson & Crane, 2025) lens, while students valued enjoyment, reduced pressure, and engagement, linking these experiences to learning outcomes and retention. CABP's multi-modal, adaptable design was widely regarded as inclusive, supporting diverse learning preferences. Overall, the findings suggest a divergence between teacher and student perspectives, highlighting the influence of dominant discourses on autistic self-concept and the need for pedagogical approaches that affirm neurodivergent strengths.

7.3. CABP as a safe/brave space

As well as the perceived benefits of CABP identified above, teacher participants reported that CABP fostered safe and supportive environments for their autistic students. Interestingly, though, no teachers articulated *why* they perceived CABP this way. Teacher participants referred to CABP as “safe and controlled” and as providing a “safe way of engaging with the feelings and thoughts of other people”, and their descriptions suggest that CABP was conceptualised as a safe space in terms of structure and predictability, elements often associated with effective pedagogical practice when working with autistic learners (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). However, no teachers reflected on this explicitly. These perceptions of teachers are also consistent with existing literature, within which drama-based

pedagogy has been characterised by educators as “safe and structured”, “risk-free” and “supportive” learning spaces that facilitate emotional exploration and social interaction within clearly defined boundaries (Doyle, 2021).

However, the perceptions of autistic students collected in Study Three differed considerably from those of teachers in Study Two and in existing literature, revealing a potential discrepancy between educator perceptions and student experiences. Rather than identifying CABP as a safe space, autistic students articulated that they sometimes felt nervous or self-conscious in CABP, and disliked being the focus of attention. Several students also described feeling awkward in the embodied and social demands of CABP, while others noted that their perfectionism, which they ascribed to being autistic, diminished their capacity to participate comfortably or with confidence. That is not to say that autistic students did not enjoy or perceive benefits associated with CABP, but those benefits were not associated with the concept of safe spaces in education.

The conflicting accounts of teachers and autistic students problematises the assumption that CABP is inherently safe when working with autistic students, which has been identified in pre-existing literature as well as by Study Two. Instead, the opposing accounts underscore the subjective and relational nature of psychological safety in educational contexts, particularly for neurodivergent students whose sensory, social, and emotional experiences may differ from those of their neurotypical peers (Botha & Frost, 2020; Milton, 2012).

The inconsistencies between teachers’ perceptions and students’ lived experiences suggests that notions of safe space within CABP requires more critical exploration, taking into account the diverse ways safety, comfort, and risk are experienced and defined by autistic students themselves. To better understand these conflicting perceptions, it is

necessary to consider the broader conceptualisation of safe spaces within educational and social contexts.

7.3.1. What makes a safe space?

Originating within social and political activism, the concept of safe space was initially developed to provide members of marginalised communities with environments where they could discuss sensitive, contentious topics without fear of discrimination (Arao & Clemens, 2023). Over time, this notion has evolved beyond its roots in activism; now, safe space describes any social or educational context which cultivates inclusivity, trust, and mutual respect (Thorne, 2014). Fundamentally, safe spaces are designed to prevent harm (Boostrom, 1998) by promoting acceptance, empathy (Mearns Macdonald, 2021), and freedom from judgment (Vacchelli, 2021). They are not neutral environments, but carefully constructed ones which seek to redress social inequities and create optimal conditions for authentic engagement (Martineau & Cyr, 2025). However, scholars increasingly reflect on the relationality of safe space, and its reliance on specific contexts; in other words, what feels safe to one individual may not feel safe to another, as safe spaces are shaped by interpersonal dynamics, power relations, and broader sociocultural contexts (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019; The Roestone Collective, 2014).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) note that the creation of safe spaces in educational contexts is rooted in the pedagogical approaches of educators, and their capacity to cultivate classroom communities grounded in openness, respect, and care. However, the notion of safety in education is inherently complex; safe space cannot be understood as a static condition, but rather as an ongoing pedagogical and socially constructed process which requires reflection, negotiation, and responsiveness to the diverse needs, experiences, and identities of students (The Roestone Collective, 2014). Further, Flensner and Von der Lippe

(2019) and the Roestone Collective (2014) argue that educational environments are inevitably shaped by hierarchies of power between teachers and students, and among peers. Such power structures can undermine the conditions needed to create safe space. So, perhaps the idea of a safe space in any classroom should be considered aspirational and continuously negotiated, rather than fixed or universally attainable (Boostrom, 1998).

With this in mind, the characterisation of CABP as a safe space from teachers in Study Two and from existing research could be considered controversial. As discussed above, autistic student participants suggested that participation in CABP sometimes elicited feelings of vulnerability, heightened self-consciousness, and other affective responses which complicate the notion of psychological safety. Further, based on the definitions of safe space provided here, it is important to consider whether any educational context can truly be considered to be safe. Therefore, CABP cannot and arguably should not be regarded as a wholly safe space. In light of this, it may be more productive to consider whether CABP is better conceptualised as a brave space.

7.3.2. What makes a brave space?

The concept of brave space was developed as a critical response to the perceived limitations of the concept of safe space. Coined by Arao and Clemens (2023), the term describes environments wherein participants are encouraged to engage bravely through their own discomfort, uncertainty, and difference. Unlike safe spaces, which prioritise the minimisation of risk, brave spaces recognise that meaningful learning and personal growth are often associated with risk-taking and vulnerability (Ford et al., 2024). Therefore, risk is an integral element of brave spaces, rather than a condition to be avoided (Arao & Clemens, 2023).

In educational settings, brave spaces encourage engagement with interpersonal differences, power dynamics, and vulnerability, rather than offering unconditional safety

(Arao & Clemens, 2023). This approach positions educators not as protectors from discomfort, but as facilitators of constructive tension; in other words, educators guide students through emotionally or intellectually challenging experiences with empathy and accountability (Ford et al., 2024). Implementing brave spaces necessitates both structural and relational considerations (Trowell, 2025). Educators must establish clear expectations for respectful dialogue, predictable routines, and consistent facilitation, combined with relational practices such as trust-building, validation, and compassionate communication (Hamilton & Petty, 2023).

Considering this characterisation, CABP could be conceptualised as a brave space when considered in alignment with the combined perspectives of teachers and autistic mainstream secondary school students in this thesis. For example, autistic students highlighted CABP's memorable, multisensory, and interactive nature, and noted that music, drama, and visual arts supported engagement, enjoyment, and retention of learning. Teacher participants similarly emphasised that CABP can provide opportunities for non-verbal self-expression, social skill development, confidence-building, perspective-taking, and imaginative engagement. These perceptions suggest that CABP can actively support personal growth, rather than simply transmitting knowledge, in alignment with the previously outlined conditions of a brave space.

Further, when reflecting on their role as facilitators, teachers noted the importance of scaffolding participation by understanding students' individual interests, abilities, and communicative preferences, and of creating structured opportunities for engagement. This differentiated approach could provide a neurodiversity-affirmative brave space for autistic students to navigate the expressive, emotional, and social demands of the creative arts. In contrast to a wholly safe space, CABP's design reflects the productive tension of brave spaces; it balances risk, challenge, and support, allowing autistic students to engage

meaningfully without erasing the differences that shape their experience (Arao & Clemens, 2023; Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019).

However, CABP's alignment with brave space is not absolute. For some autistic students, the intensity of creative engagement, its social exposure, sensory unpredictability, and emotional demand could perhaps exceed tolerable limits. Brave space theory presumes a degree of voluntary participation and agency in engaging with discomfort (Arao & Clemens, 2023). In educational contexts, though, with the existing implicit and explicit power structures between students and teachers, autistic students may not always possess equal capacity to consent to and manage such experiences (Zilli et al., 2020). Without careful scaffolding and consent, the notion of bravery risks being imposed rather than chosen.

7.3.3. Summary: CABP as a safe/brave space

In sum, teacher participants in this study consistently characterised CABP as a safe and controlled environment for their autistic students. From their perspective, CABP offered a predictable and structured setting which minimised potential risks, providing a supportive context for learning and social engagement. However, autistic students frequently reported feelings of nervousness, self-consciousness, or constraint due to the social and sensory demands of CABP. This discrepancy highlights a tension between teacher perceptions of CABP as inherently safe and the lived experiences of autistic participants, suggesting that safety in this context may be perceived differently by different stakeholder groups.

Given that teachers frequently describe CABP as a safe space, both in this study and in pre-existing literature, and considering that autistic participants' experiences challenge this characterisation, the concept of CABP as a safe space warrants critical inquiry. With that in mind, future research could explore the reasons why teachers define CABP as safe, including

the specific parameters they use to define safe space in education, and the assumptions underlying these perceptions.

Further, existing literature distinguishes between safe and brave spaces, suggesting that safe spaces are relational and context-dependent, providing protection from judgment or harm, whereas brave spaces encourage engagement with discomfort, challenge, and risk. Considering the findings of this thesis, CABP may more accurately be described as a brave space. To date, research has not explicitly explored CABP through the lens of brave educational spaces. So, future studies could examine if and how CABP, when facilitated with autistic mainstream secondary school students, aligns with brave space principles. Such an approach may provide a richer understanding of how CABP functions as an educational space and inform the development of inclusive practices that balance safety, support, and growth.

7.4. So, should CABP be implemented?

The identified perceptions of both teacher and autistic student participants suggest that CABP is a promising pedagogical approach for supporting autistic students in mainstream secondary school classrooms. Whilst a number of identified CABP-associated benefits were aligned with a corrective ideological (Robinson & Crane, 2025) ontology of autism, some neurodiversity-affirmative benefits of CABP when used with autistic mainstream secondary school students were also identified. For example, teachers in particular perceived CABP to be an interactive and socially engaging approach which encouraged autistic students to express themselves creatively and to build meaningful connections with peers. They highlighted its potential to create conditions conducive to exploration, emotional growth, and authentic self-expression, qualities often perceived to be lacking in traditional, outcome-oriented pedagogies which prioritise outcome over process. Similarly, autistic students reported that CABP supported the development of self-understanding and

self-advocacy, reinforcing their sense of belonging and participation within the classroom community.

Collectively, these findings illustrate the perceived potential value of CABP as an inclusive, neurodiversity-affirmative pedagogical framework. However, findings also illustrate that the value of CABP, as perceived by both teachers and autistic students, is highly dependent on nuanced, balanced, and contextually sensitive implementation. While CABP appears to have the potential to cultivate what Arao and Clemens (2023) conceptualise as a brave space, both participant groups suggested that it should not be treated as a fixed or universally applicable pedagogical framework. Instead, they advocated for an approach that is adaptive, reflective, and responsive to the needs of individual autistic learners and specific classroom dynamics. CABP may, therefore, be most effectively implemented as a balanced, structured (Doherty et al., 2023), socially constructivist and relational pedagogy, facilitated at the educator's discretion and tailored to the classroom context and the needs of their autistic and non-autistic students.

Further, both teachers and autistic students identified potential risks associated with the use of CABP that must be borne in mind. While teachers valued the creativity and openness of the approach, they acknowledged that its multisensory, unpredictable, and emotionally charged nature requires sensitive facilitation so as to not overstimulate some autistic students. Autistic participants similarly reflected that CABP could at times be uncomfortable or emotionally exposing, leading in some cases to feeling overwhelmed. Autistic students were also concerned that perfectionism, which some of them associated with being autistic, meant that they would take CABP too seriously. Further, CABP was considered to be stressful and distracting in some cases. These accounts are novel, as Study One illustrated that pre-existing research had not identified any risks associated with CABP

aside from the potential for overstimulation. This identification of risks illustrates the benefits of hearing autistic voices on matters which concern them.

Collectively, considering associated risks and benefits, participant accounts suggest that CABP should be implemented with autistic students in mainstream secondary schools; this finding is in-line with pre-existing research which has identified numerous benefits to CABP implementation in this context (Doyle & Kim, 2025). However, based on the newly identified risks, further empirical exploration as to whether the benefits outweigh the risks is required. It would seem, however, that perhaps the use of CABP should be conditional, reflective, and responsive in order to mitigate risks and maximise its potential as an inclusive pedagogical approach. Perhaps CABP should be a pedagogical approach which is not prescriptive, but that is balanced and used dependent on the educator's professional judgment.

Findings further illustrate that the question of implementation is far from straightforward. Both teachers and autistic students identified a number of barriers that may inhibit the successful implementation of CABP in mainstream settings. These barriers are explored in greater depth below.

7.4.1. Identified barriers to CABP implementation

Across both student and teacher perceptions, several barriers to CABP implementation with autistic students in mainstream secondary schools were identified. The first was the perceived inappropriateness of CABP across all subject areas. Students argued that CABP aligned more naturally with creative subjects such as drama or art, but was ill-suited to more structured subjects such as Maths and Science. They described these areas as requiring repetition and strict adherence to established routines, which would leave minimal space and time for experimentation with different pedagogical approaches. Teachers echoed this concern,

particularly those from STEM backgrounds. They reported having difficulty imagining how creative pedagogical approaches could fit within their exam-driven, content-heavy curricula. There were, however, exceptions in the data, where participants perceived that CABP could work effectively in STEM subjects. One student participant, for example, reflected that their friend “learned all the elements of the periodic table through a song”. Similarly, two mathematics teachers noted that they used magna-tiles (magnetic, colourful, shaped tiles that can be grouped to make larger shapes or structures) and interactive drawing, cutting and sketching activities for learning abstract mathematical concepts.

Both groups also associated CABP with potential behaviour management issues. Some autistic students acknowledged that less structured lessons could lead to increased noise or off-task behaviour, particularly among peers who might exploit the freedoms which creative lessons facilitate. Teachers similarly expressed concern that creative, less predictable tasks could cause disruption, particularly due to large class sizes. Due to the identification of overstimulation as a CABP-associated risk when used with autistic students, this barrier could be considered significant. Additionally, some teachers perceived limited interest or confidence in artistic expression among autistic students, suggesting that disparities in creative skill and engagement could potentially pose a barrier to implementation.

A lack of teacher knowledge and experience with CABP was identified as a substantial barrier to CABP implementation. Teachers admitted that they were unfamiliar with CABP and uncertain about suitable activities, particularly those who taught non-arts subjects. This led to concerns about how to begin facilitating CABP with no experience, or how to manage lessons effectively. Teachers also highlighted the challenge of individualising CABP for autistic students, whose sensory preferences, learning styles, and communicative needs vary widely.

Finally, infrastructural barriers to implementation were widely reported. This was the most commonly identified barrier to CABP implementation with autistic students in a mainstream secondary school classroom across both studies.

7.4.1.1. The problem of educational infrastructure

The term “educational infrastructure” encompasses everything which makes schools work well, from buildings and classrooms to libraries, to clean water, electricity, and internet access. Educational infrastructure also encompasses digital systems which help schools run smoothly, like student records, communication platforms, school management processes (Barrett et al., 2025), and the people and processes that support teaching, such as leadership, teacher training, and ways to share information. This means that educational infrastructure is both physical and organisational (Diamond & Spillane, 2016). Good educational infrastructure not only helps students learn better, but also improves their health, safety, and overall experience at school (Barrett et al., 2025). It is not just about having buildings or equipment, but is also about how well these resources are maintained, organised, and adapted to teachers’ and students’ needs (Hussain & Afzal, 2023).

Educational infrastructure plays a pivotal role in the successful implementation of inclusive pedagogy. Inadequate infrastructure, such as inaccessible classrooms, large class sizes and insufficient teacher training, are significant barriers to the implementation of inclusive pedagogy (Sivaguru & Irudhaya, 2023). Such barriers make it challenging for teachers to accommodate diverse learning needs, thus limiting the effectiveness of alternative pedagogies (Walton, 2025) such as CABP. Teachers in the current study identified educational infrastructure as a barrier to CABP implementation with autistic mainstream secondary school students. For example, class size, funding, time, resources, facilities, training, support and curriculum were all identified by teachers as infrastructural barriers to

CABP implementation with autistic students in mainstream secondary schools and, indeed, to CABP implementation more generally.

Teachers explained that integrating CABP into the school day was often challenging because the education system prioritises strict adherence to the curriculum, maintaining order, and achieving measurable results. In this environment, creative and process-based activities were often viewed as optional extras, valued only when they could be directly linked to conventional academic goals. Autistic students expressed similar frustrations, describing their schools as rigid and uniform spaces built around efficiency and control. They felt that such a system left little room for flexibility, imagination, or the creative and relational forms of learning that CABP facilitates. These experiences of rigidity echo long-standing discussions in education research. For example, Bernstein (1971) argued that schools often operate with strict requirements around what counts as real learning, and how lessons should be taught; such rules create rigid systems and perhaps make it more difficult to support students who learn in different ways. As CABP is dependent upon flexibility, freedom, and collaboration, qualities which do not simply fit into rigid systems, it is feasible that educational infrastructure could make it challenging for teachers to facilitate CABP, even when they may perceive it to be beneficial for their autistic students.

Another identified infrastructural barrier concerns the classroom environment. Autistic students described mainstream secondary school classrooms as noisy, crowded, and unpredictable, and reflected that this could make CABP participation exhausting. The absence of accessible learning spaces and resources has long prevented disabled students from fully participating in classroom activities, which directly undermines the principles of inclusive pedagogy (Hollings, 2021). Teachers supported this, reflecting that class sizes of 30+ students with a diverse range of individual needs could make it challenging to facilitate

CABP, and that a lack of space and resources to facilitate CABP effectively were a significant barrier to implementation.

Finally, the lack of time, training and professional development opportunities for educators on inclusive pedagogies such as CABP was considered to exacerbate the identified barriers to implementation. For example, teachers pointed out that not having enough training or support makes implementing CABP difficult. Managing open-ended, multi-modal activities requires confidence, but a lack of training and support, accountability pressures and fear of losing control was perceived to make teachers hesitant. Further, teachers were concerned they were not adequately trained to meet the needs of their autistic students, a concern supported by existing literature (Sivaguru & Irudhaya, 2023).

7.4.2. Summary

In summary, while CABP appears to show potential for supporting autistic students in mainstream secondary schools, its successful implementation is made less likely by barriers, most significantly the broader educational infrastructure within which teachers and autistic students operate. Systems built around standardisation, emphasising curriculum coverage, discipline, and measurable outcomes, have been said to marginalise the open-ended, process-oriented, and embodied pedagogical approach of CABP. Further, the physical conditions of schooling, including large class sizes, inflexible timetables, and sensory-challenging classroom environments, have reportedly restricted opportunities for autistic students to engage meaningfully in CABP.

These perceived barriers echo long-standing theoretical critiques of educational infrastructure (Bernstein, 1971; Hollings, 2021; Sivaguru & Irudhaya, 2023), which argue that the structures and norms within mainstream education privilege efficiency and control over creativity and diversity. With that in mind, the following section considers the ways in

which barriers, including infrastructural ones, might be overcome to facilitate the implementation of alternative and inclusive pedagogies such as CABP.

7.5. The CABP Manifesto: Looking to the future

Overcoming the infrastructural and other barriers identified above perhaps requires a shift from viewing inclusion as an accommodation, to understanding it as a process of systemic transformation (Booth et al., 2016; Florian, 2019). Rather than fitting autistic students into existing frameworks, schools must evolve to support flexible, creative, and multisensory modes of learning (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Parsons et al., 2011; L. Pellicano et al., 2018). With that in-mind, autistic students, mainstream secondary school teachers and I² designed two versions of a “CABP Manifesto”. Version one is designed for an audience of policy makers, and identifies three action points:

1. Equip teachers with knowledge and skills in inclusive pedagogies, including CABP, through initial training and continuous professional development.
2. Fund or prioritise research aimed at addressing infrastructural barriers to implementing inclusive pedagogies, including CABP.
3. Support the development of an open-access platform which will house guidance and examples to support teachers in implementing CABP with autistic students in their practice.

Version two is designed for an audience of educators, and identifies three action points:

² In this section, “we” is used to refer to myself and the co-designers, made up of autistic mainstream secondary school students and mainstream secondary school teachers.

1. Critically think about your own understanding of autism and how that understanding impacts the way you work with autistic students. For example, think about how your understanding of autism impacts your pedagogical choices.
2. Explore the balanced implementation of creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP) in your classroom by looking through your long and short-term plans, consider in which of your lessons CABP may be an appropriate pedagogical approach and start there.
3. To express interest in getting involved in the co-production of an open-access platform which will house CABP-associated resources, activity examples, data and evidence, email me at: kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk

In the following sections, each recommendation will be discussed in-turn.

7.5.1.1. Critically think about your own understanding of autism and how that understanding impacts the way you work with autistic students (Educators)

As discussed in *Section 2.1. The ontology of autism* and *Section 7.2.1. Perceptions of autism*, a pathology-focused ontology of autism frames autistic people as having deficits or problems that require fixing, while overlooking the role of society and the environment in shaping their experiences. In contrast, a neurodiversity-affirmative perspective regards autistic people as different rather than deficient, prioritises wellbeing, and focuses on removing social barriers to education instead of attempting to “fix” the individual. Research in England suggests that autistic people tend to prefer a neurodiversity-affirmative perspective (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2024).

In my research, teachers identified that autistic students often face social challenges at school, which they perceived as making participation in CABP more difficult. Autistic students similarly described their social abilities in terms of impairments and linked these

challenges explicitly to being autistic. These perspectives reflect longstanding discourses in autism research that frame autistic social functioning as a deficit, rather than a shared challenge in which both autistic and non-autistic individuals struggle to understand each other (Milton, 2012). This may result from internalised stigma, where negative societal beliefs are absorbed into one's self-concept over time (den Houting et al., 2021).

Considering this, we recommend that educators engage in ongoing critical self-reflection, examining how their beliefs about autism shape classroom interactions, expectations, and pedagogical strategies. They should carefully evaluate whether their teaching practices align with a neurodiversity-affirmative framework and focus on removing barriers rather than attempting to measure autistic individuals against non-autistic standards (Robinson & Crane, 2025). We consider it to be important that teachers understand how deficit-oriented perceptions may unintentionally affect autistic students' participation in their classroom and their engagement across both academic and social contexts. To deepen their understanding of neurodiversity and lived experience, we recommend that educators seek out training, literature, and perceptions of autistic individuals, preferably those authored by autistic scholars and community members, to ensure that their practice is informed by authentic voices and evidence-based approaches.

However, we recognise that educators, and classroom teachers in particular, are time poor which has been found to impact their health, wellbeing and attrition (Creagh et al., 2025). With that in mind, we recommend that policy makers and school leaders focus on equipping teachers with knowledge and skills to facilitate inclusive pedagogies, including CABP, with autistic students through initial training and continuous professional development.

7.5.1.2. Equip teachers with knowledge and skills in inclusive pedagogies, including CABP, through initial training and continuous professional development (Policy makers)

Students expressed that teachers should receive training on how to implement CABP, highlighting the importance of understanding its benefits and practicalities. One teacher reflected that their PGCE training had focused on different pedagogical approaches and the theories behind them, but noted that not all current training follows this model. Teachers also observed that training during the “creative decade” (circa 1999) better prepared educators with the skills needed to facilitate creative pedagogies effectively.

With that in-mind, we recommend that initial teacher training and continued professional development prioritises equipping educators with a solid understanding of inclusive pedagogies, including CABP. Ensuring that teachers have knowledge of the benefits of CABP, and other inclusive pedagogical approaches, when working with autistic students and practical strategies for implementation could help them feel confident and capable in facilitating CABP and other inclusive pedagogical approaches in this context. Ongoing opportunities for learning, reflection, and collaboration should be encouraged so that inclusive practices remain a consistent and well-supported part of classroom teaching.

7.5.1.3. Open access platform development (Policy makers & educators)

Both autistic students and teachers suggested that greater access to information about autism and about CABP could help teachers to implement CABP more effectively; one student, for example, recommended that more resources should be made available to teachers. Teachers were more specific; they expressed a need for concrete examples of how CABP can be used with autistic students so they did not need to generate ideas themselves. Another teacher also suggested that data reporting on how CABP supports and motivates autistic students would be useful. One teacher proposed that a particularly valuable next step would be the

development of an open-access platform, providing well-researched activities integrated into schemes of work.

With that in-mind, we recommend the development of practical information and guidance for teachers on how to use CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school students. This platform could support teachers to feel confident and supported in applying CABP in this context. In alignment with co-production principals (Niner & Portman, 2021; Powell, 2025), perhaps it would be useful if teachers, autistic students and policy makers were involved in the development of the library and the online resources it would house. This co-production could involve creating generalisable and transferable resources and guidance, sharing data and evidence of impact, and the facilitation of collaboration and exchanging ideas among educators. By prioritising knowledge, support, and community, perhaps teachers would be more likely to implement CABP effectively, and adapt it to meet the needs of their autistic students.

7.5.1.4. Explore the balanced implementation of CABP in your classroom

(Educators)

Both teachers and students agreed that CABP should be used in classrooms, but emphasised the need for balance, especially when working with autistic students. Students noted that they would not want CABP in every lesson, as it could become annoying and may not always suit the lesson content. Teachers acknowledged its value for developing soft skills, such as teamwork, but warned that creativity can sometimes distract from core learning.

Teachers also highlighted that the unpredictability and social demands of group work can make CABP challenging for autistic students, while autistic students reported that predictable structures helped them feel more comfortable and able to participate effectively. This underscores the importance of implementing CABP thoughtfully, with careful planning

and scaffolding to support autistic learners. Educators are encouraged to explore a balanced approach to CABP by reviewing long- and short-term plans, identifying lessons where CABP is appropriate, and starting from there.

With that in-mind, we recommend that CABP be implemented thoughtfully and flexibly, with attention to the needs of all students, including autistic students. Educators should consider when and how creative approaches can best support learning, balancing them with other teaching methods and providing structures which support students to engage confidently and meaningfully.

7.5.1.5. Fund or prioritise research aimed at addressing infrastructural barriers to implementing inclusive pedagogies, including CABP (Policy makers)

Both teachers and students identified a range of infrastructural barriers to implementing CABP, particularly for autistic students. These included large class sizes, limited time, insufficient funding, restricted access to resources, inflexible curricula, and pressures from exams. Teachers emphasised the need for further research into how educational infrastructures affect pedagogical innovation more broadly. One teacher noted that a research-backed critique of failing systems could be a powerful way to highlight these challenges.

With that in-mind, we recommend that funders support and prioritise research with aims to better understand how infrastructural factors shape the implementation of inclusive pedagogies, including CABP, across mainstream secondary school provisions. By identifying infrastructural barriers and exploring facilitators, policymakers and educators will be better equipped to make informed decisions on the implementation of inclusive pedagogy such as CABP, with autistic mainstream secondary school students.

7.5.2. Summary

The CABP Manifesto calls for a shift from the conceptualisation of CABP, to the operationalisation of CABP and other inclusive pedagogical approaches. It urges policymakers to equip teachers with skills in inclusive pedagogy, fund research on infrastructural barriers, and support the development of an open-access platform of CABP resources. Educators are encouraged to reflect on their understanding of autism, implement CABP thoughtfully and in balance, and engage with guidance and resources. Across all recommendations, the focus is on fostering neurodiversity-affirmative, inclusive pedagogical practices, supporting teachers, addressing systemic challenges, and enabling inclusive, creative learning that meets the needs of autistic students and their non-autistic peers.

7.6. Limitations of this thesis

While this thesis makes several original contributions, it is not without limitations. Perhaps the greatest limitation was the size and scope of the samples for both the empirical studies. The teacher questionnaire, while rich in qualitative depth, was based on a relatively small, self-selecting group of teacher respondents. It is also possible that those who decided to take part were already positively inclined toward CABP, as I did not collect data concerning this variable. However, it is important to note that not all participants were familiar with, or users of, CABP and not all thought it was suitable for their subject. Similarly, the autistic student sample consisted of only 10 participants who were, again, self-selected; therefore, those who chose to take part may have been motivated by positive experiences with the arts, potentially skewing the outcomes of the study. With that being said, autistic student participants in particular cited varied interests and variable opinions about the arts. These varied interests, combined with the novel identification of CABP-associated risks from autistic participants, perhaps reduces the risk of self-selection and positivity bias.

Next, this research had limited focus on intersectionality. First and foremost, autistic participants all communicated using voice, and there was no representation of autistic individuals who were non-verbal or had co-occurring learning disabilities. As the study was focused on mainstream secondary school provisions, this is perhaps unsurprising and unproblematic; however, the exclusion of learning-disabled and non- or minimally-verbal autistic students perpetuates the epistemic injustice this thesis aimed to address. Alongside this, analysis of student data did not consider participant intersectionality, including gender, race, socioeconomic status, and co-occurring neurodivergence. The reason for this was that data were not collected on participants' protected characteristics, on their gender, age and diagnosis. This is a limitation because these factors can significantly shape educational experiences, access to resources, and the ways in which students are perceived and supported in school. Without accounting for these intersecting identities, the findings risk presenting an incomplete picture of autistic students' experiences, potentially overlooking the compounded barriers faced by multiple marginalised students and limiting the applicability of recommendations for inclusive pedagogy.

Another limitation of this thesis was that some perceptions of autistic students and mainstream secondary school teachers conflated autistic-specific issues with general classroom challenges. For example, both teachers and students identified the benefit of CABP in educational outcomes; this is not an autism-specific benefit, but a general perceived benefit of CABP when used with any and all students. This makes it difficult to disentangle perceptions which are unique to autistic learners. Whilst this is beneficial for a study exploring experiences and perceptions on inclusive pedagogy or CABP more widely, it is a limitation of this thesis due to its specific focus on autism.

Finally, in the teacher questionnaire study, there was potential inclusion of AI generated responses. After the first round of dissemination, a large quantity of questionnaire

responses were received over a small period of time. I determined that a number of responses were AI generated. After consulting with the ethics committee at the University of York, I made the decision to exclude responses based on the following criteria: (1) the response has \leq 43% progress or has entirely blank qualitative text responses ($n = 15$); (2) qualitative text responses are not in English ($n = 4$); (3) Qualitative text responses are nonsensical, contradictory, or identical to responses from other participants ($n = 5$; Storozuk et al., 2020). Applying these criteria resulted in the exclusion of 24, and the analysis of 58 total responses. Though this exclusion improved the reliability of the included data, there is the potential that AI generated responses remained in the dataset following exclusion, or that authentic responses were excluded in the process. With that in-mind, this remains a limitation of the thesis.

7.7. Remaining gaps in research and recommendations for future research

On concluding this research, several gaps in research remain which have influenced my recommendations for future research in the field. First, despite its identified potential prevalence in mainstream and special provision educational settings, little research has explored how internalised stigma might affect autistic students' pedagogical experiences. Future studies should investigate how school staff externalise their ontologies of autism, consciously or unconsciously, to students, and the impact that this might have on autistic students' experiences in their classroom. This could deepen our understanding of autistic self-perception and illustrate the ways in which educational environments may reinforce pathology-focused ontologies of autism.

Next, although teachers describe CABP as a “safe space”, autistic students' experiences, identified in Study Three, challenged this perception. As safe space is consistently discussed throughout pre-existing literature and the teacher studies in this thesis,

I recommend that future research examines *why* teachers define CABP as safe for autistic students, including the criteria and assumptions about autism underlying their perceptions. Additionally, CABP has not yet been explored through the framework of brave educational spaces. Investigating whether and how CABP aligns with brave space principles in mainstream secondary school classrooms when used with autistic students could provide insight into its role as an inclusive pedagogical approach.

Alongside this, there is also a lack of autistic-led and co-produced research in the field. This thesis has identified benefits to involving autistic voices, including the identification of CABP-associated risks, from a first-person perspective. With that in mind, future studies should continue to include diverse autistic voices, including those who are minimally verbal and/or have co-occurring learning disabilities who were not included in the current studies, and employ participatory, inclusive and arts-based methods to reflect their lived experience more authentically.

Research should also examine teacher-training models and institutional policies, particularly the effectiveness of neurodiversity-affirmative training and training on inclusive pedagogical approaches. This could better equip educators with both theoretical understanding and practical strategies for supporting their autistic students. Developing practical guidance and resources for teachers to support them in implementing CABP in mainstream secondary schools not only with autistic students but with all students, could increase their confidence and effectiveness. Co-production with autistic students, teachers, and policymakers could ensure these resources are evidence-based, generalisable, and responsive to lived experience, supporting knowledge-sharing, collaboration, and community-building.

Finally, further research is needed to examine the impact of educational infrastructural factors on the implementation of inclusive pedagogies such as CABP in mainstream

secondary school provisions. Identifying infrastructural barriers and exploring the ways in which they might be overcome to better support autistic students in mainstream secondary schools could help policymakers and educators to make informed decisions about adopting and adapting inclusive pedagogical approaches with their autistic students.

8. Conclusions

8.1. Summary of the thesis

The aim of this thesis was to explore autistic students' and mainstream secondary school teachers' perceptions of how CABP might contribute to more inclusive educational experiences for autistic students in mainstream secondary schools. Within a neurodiversity-affirmative paradigm, it challenged the dominance of pathology-focused ontologies of autism which have long afflicted autism research and educational practice. Central to this work was a commitment to epistemic justice, to addressing the historical systemic exclusion of autistic voices from knowledge production about autism. By engaging autistic students, teachers, and an autistic co-producer throughout the research process, this thesis sought to conduct research “with” rather than “on” the autistic community.

The project was made up of three interrelated empirical studies. **Study One** was a mixed-methods systematic review and convergent-integrated synthesis of 24 studies of CAEPs with autistic students aged 11–19. The review identified four overarching themes: perceptions of autism, the nature of CAEPs, outcomes of CAEPs, and barriers and facilitators. While the literature consistently reported positive outcomes, such as increased social engagement, emotional expression, and self-confidence following CAEP participation, analysis identified significant limitations across the board. For example, a persistent corrective, pathology-focused ontology of autism was evident across the majority of included studies and there was a significant lack of autistic representation across the included studies. I recommended that future research address the positivity bias, methodological quality issues and corrective, pathology-focused ontology of autism evident in research in the field.

Study Two explored teachers' perceptions of CABP through a qualitative questionnaire distributed to mainstream secondary school teachers in England. Teachers described creative arts-based pedagogy as creating an inclusive, “safe space” for autistic

students, within which they could learn, develop socially, emotionally and personally, outside the confines of text-based and linear teaching. However, such accounts had similar ableist undertones to the literature identified in Study One; there was a recurring assumption that CABP's primary value was in the improvement of autistic students' social skills, or in their improved alignment with allistic norms. Further, though CABP was perceived overwhelmingly positively, infrastructural barriers, amongst others, such as time, funding, and a lack of training, were identified as significant barriers to CABP implementation.

Study Three began to address the epistemic injustice evident in the field by collating autistic students' own perceptions through semi-structured interviews, analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Autistic participants reflected on the shortcomings of traditional pedagogy, which they generally perceived to be rigid, alienating, and unsuited to their sensory and communicative needs. In contrast, they described CABP as a space that fostered authenticity, creativity, and self-expression. Some students did raise concerns. This was novel due to the positivity bias that had previously existed in the field. CABP-associated risks identified included the behaviour of peers, the unpredictability of CABP, and a dislike of being in the spotlight. These newly identified risks suggest that, while CABP has been identified as a promising inclusive pedagogical approach, its benefits are contingent on balance and how sensitively and flexibly it is implemented.

These studies, and direct quotes from study participants, made up the **CABP Manifesto** for educators and policymakers. The manifesto outlines practical and philosophically actionable next steps for successfully embedding neurodiversity-affirmative, inclusive CABP in mainstream secondary school classrooms. Action points include a critical consideration of one's ontology (or understanding) of autism, the development of initial teacher training and continued professional development to include information about inclusive pedagogical approaches such as CABP, and the development of an open-access

platform to house resources and guidance to support teachers in implementing CABP with their autistic students. The manifesto, whilst also identifying action points for policy makers and educators, has directly impacted the recommendations for future research identified in this thesis.

In sum, based on the CABP manifesto and other findings and discussion points from this thesis, I recommend that future research explores how school staff project ontologies of autism to students, and examines how CABP functions as a brave educational space in mainstream secondary schools. Studies should also continue to include diverse autistic voices, employing co-produced, participatory, and arts-based methods to authentically reflect lived experience. Alongside this, research should explore teacher training, institutional policies, and infrastructural factors to develop practical, evidence-based guidance that supports the effective implementation of CABP and other inclusive pedagogical approaches with autistic students across mainstream provisions.

8.2. Addressing the Research Questions

Perhaps it would be useful to conclude this thesis by briefly addressing the four research questions identified at the onset.

8.2.1. How successfully have the creative arts been used with autistic students in secondary education?

Findings from the systematic review in Study One illustrated that CAEPs, including CABP, have been used with varying degrees of success across secondary school provisions, globally. Studies identified benefits of CAEPs, such as autistic students' development of greater social communication, emotional regulation, and self-esteem among autistic students. However, the review also identified conceptual and methodological limitations in this body of research,

including an evident positivity bias, a corrective ideological (Robinson & Crane, 2025) definition of “success”, a pathology-focused ontology of autism and a significant absence of autistic voice. As a result, I could not confidently say how successfully the creative arts had been used with autistic students in secondary education based on pre-existing literature.

Data from my empirical studies with both teachers and autistic students, however, addressed this research question. Both groups consistently highlighted the benefits of creative arts, particularly music, in supporting learning and information retention. Autistic students recounted fond memories of CABP from their primary education, emphasising its meaningful and lasting impact. However, they also observed that CABP was far less prevalent in secondary school provisions. Mainstream secondary school teachers, conversely, recalled using CABP with their classes, particularly with autistic students, and remembered these experiences fondly. This discrepancy between teacher and student accounts highlights a possible gap between reported practice and perceived experience, which suggests a need for further research.

Overall, these findings suggest that while the creative arts have clear potential to support autistic students, their application in secondary education remains inconsistent, under-theorised, and insufficiently documented. Considering this, this research cannot definitively answer the question of how successfully creative arts have been used with autistic students in secondary schools. What is clear, however, is that when creative arts are meaningfully integrated into pedagogy, they are memorable and generally valued by autistic students and mainstream secondary school teachers.

8.2.2. How do teachers and autistic students in mainstream secondary schools perceive CABP in the context of teaching autistic students?

In exploring how teachers and autistic students in mainstream secondary schools perceive CABP when teaching autistic students, perceptions appeared to be interconnected with participants' underlying ontologies of autism. Teachers' perceptions were largely shaped by a pathology-focused ontology of autism, viewing autistic social functioning as a deficit and defining "success" within a corrective ideological framework. These perceptions were also evident in students' self-perceptions, with many describing their social experiences and functioning as impairment. Autistic students, however, also articulated neurodiversity-affirmative perceptions, recognising autism as a difference rather than disorder in some cases.

These ontological positions shaped participants' perceptions of CABP. Teachers tended to focus on CABP-associated risks which were interconnected with autistic students' social interaction and sensory regulation, framing the challenges experienced as being specific to autism. Autistic students, in contrast, reported more general classroom associated risks, such as poor behaviour. Similarly, the perceived benefits of CABP were interpreted differently: teachers often highlighted the role of CABP in developing autistic students' social skills, confidence, empathy, and perspective-taking, whereas autistic students valued CABP for enjoyment, reduced pressure, and increased embodied engagement; they linked these experiences to improved learning and retention. Both groups recognised the inclusive potential of CABP's multi-modal and adaptable design, which accommodates diverse learning preferences.

Overall, these findings indicate that there are differences between teacher and student perceptions. Findings illustrate how dominant pathology-focused ontologies of autism shape both teaching practices and autistic self-identity, and highlight the need for pedagogical

approaches which value neurodiverse strengths, centre autistic experiences, and move beyond corrective ideological frameworks.

8.2.3. What do teachers and autistic students in mainstream secondary schools report as barriers and facilitators to using CABP with autistic students?

Both groups identified a wide range of barriers and facilitators which they perceived to impact the implementation of CABP with autistic mainstream secondary school students. Teachers frequently cited infrastructural barriers such as limited time, inadequate funding, and pressure to meet curricular targets. These barriers often resulted in the marginalisation of creative activities, or resulted in the creative arts being confined to extracurricular contexts.

Teachers also described a lack of confidence and training in how to adapt CABP for diverse learners, such as autistic students. Some expressed uncertainty about managing sensory sensitivities or balancing freedom with structure in mixed-ability groups. These challenges were made more complex as teachers perceived policy, curriculum and accountability pressures, as the current education system in England was perceived to prioritise measurable outcomes over process-oriented learning.

From the autistic students' perspective, the primary barrier to implementing CABP was its perceived inappropriateness in certain subjects and contexts. Students also perceived that structural barriers, such as departmental and leadership expectations further restricted teachers' pedagogical freedom. Autistic students also noted classroom management as a potential barrier, as increased noise or off-task behaviour appeared to be more common during CABP. Finally, autistic students highlighted practical barriers to implementation, such as insufficient physical space for activities like drama.

Overall, CABP was not considered by either participant group to be a universal solution to difficulties experienced in traditional pedagogical approaches; the suitability of CABP was considered to be dependent on subject, context, and logistics.

8.2.4. What do teachers and autistic young people believe is essential to the future of CABP?

Finally, teachers and autistic students alike believed that CABP should be implemented in mainstream secondary school classrooms with autistic students, but recommended its balanced implementation in conjunction with traditional and other inclusive pedagogical approaches. Teachers and autistic students emphasised that the future of CABP depends on educators critically reflecting on their understanding of autism and how this shapes their classroom practice. Further, both teachers and students suggested that ongoing professional development and training are essential to ensure that educators have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to implement CABP with autistic students effectively, including understanding its practical benefits and inclusive strategies.

Another action point identified by both groups of participants was the development of accessible, practical resources to support CABP implementation. Both teachers suggested that an open-access platform could provide concrete examples, guidance, and evidence of impact, reducing the burden on teachers to generate ideas independently. Participants also highlighted the importance of balanced implementation, noting that while CABP can develop soft skills and engagement, predictable structures and careful planning are necessary to support autistic students and prevent creative activities from becoming overwhelming or disruptive.

Finally, both groups recognised that infrastructural barriers, including large class sizes, limited resources, inflexible curricula, and exam pressures, must be addressed before CABP can be effectively implemented with autistic students. Participants recommended that

policymakers fund research into these infrastructural barriers to inform future practice and ensure equitable access to creative, inclusive pedagogy.

8.3. Conclusion

Autistic students do not always experience genuine inclusion in mainstream secondary schools; structural inequalities and traditional pedagogical approaches continue to limit opportunities for meaningful participation and belonging (CCO, 2024; Department for Education, 2023). Both autistic students and teachers in mainstream settings have identified CABP as a promising, inclusive approach that could support the dismantling of some of these systemic barriers, provided that the barriers to its implementation are addressed.

Collectively, the findings from this thesis highlight CABP's potential as an inclusive pedagogical framework which prioritises the process of teaching and learning over narrowly defined educational outcomes. Yet, the effectiveness of CABP, as perceived by both teachers and autistic students, depends on its thoughtful, balanced, and contextually sensitive implementation. Genuine inclusion cannot be achieved through surface-level adoption; it requires structural commitment, practical support, and a willingness to challenge entrenched norms in education.

Through the design of the CABP Manifesto, we (the co-designers) have identified clear, actionable next steps to support the thoughtful, balanced, and contextually sensitive implementation of CABP. Now it falls to educators, policymakers, and researchers alike to take action; to champion creative, inclusive, and equitable learning environments wherein autistic students are not simply accommodated, but truly supported to meaningfully participate and belong in mainstream education, and to achieve and thrive.

Supplementary Materials

Supplementary Table 1

Questionnaire Questions

Research Question	Question	Format
How do teachers in mainstream secondary schools perceive CABP in the context of teaching autistic students?	Please describe your personal and professional experience with autism.	Open text
	In your career as a teacher, have you taught autistic students?	Multiple Choice
	To the extent that you are aware, how often do you think you have taught, or do you think you teach autistic students using creative art-based pedagogy?	Multiple Choice
	If always, frequently, sometimes or infrequently, Please provide an example of a time you taught an autistic student using creative art-based pedagogy?	Open text
	If never or unsure, Why do you think that is?	Open text
	How do you feel about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of creative art-based pedagogy in the context of teaching autistic students in a mainstream school and why?	Open text
	What do you perceive to be the positives of creative art-based pedagogy in the context of teaching autistic students in a mainstream school?	Open text
	What do you perceive to be the negatives of creative art-based pedagogy in the context of teaching autistic students in a mainstream school?	Open text
	How likely are you to use creative arts-based pedagogy with autistic students in your practice?	Multiple Choice
What do teachers in secondary mainstream schools report as barriers and facilitators to using CABP with autistic students?	Is there anything that helps / might help you use creative arts-based pedagogy with autistic students in your practice?	Open text
	Is there anything that gets / might get in the way of you using creative arts-based pedagogy with autistic students in your practice?	Open text

Supplementary Table 2

First Cycle Coding

Codes (Domain code is related to)

Inclusive (P)

Accessible (P)

Safe space (P)

Structure (P)

Process over outcome (P)

Practical (P)

Non-verbal (P)

Theory of Mind (P)

Self Expression (P)

Confidence building (P)

Peer Interaction (P)

Anxiety Reducing (P)

Communication skills (P)

Imaginative skills (P)

Social Skills (P)

Memorable (P)

Complex learning (P)

Engaging (P)

Multi-sensory (P)

Exposure (P)

Natural learning (P)

Fun to participate (P)

Fun to deliver (P)

Personal preference (N)

People are different (N)

Differentiation needed (N)

Personal interest (N)

What about other students? (N)

What about staff? (N)

Lacking social cues (N)
Friendship Challenges (N)
Collaborative challenges (N)
Overstimulation (N)
Exposing (N)
Dysregulating (N)
Lacking Predictability (N)
Time consuming (N)
Hard to Assess (N)
Hard to Grasp (N)
Subject dependant (N)
Lacking Training (B)
Lacking Knowledge (B)
Lacking Confidence (B)
Student Behaviour (B)
Differentiation (B)
Autism (B)
Interests (B)
Skills (B)
Sensory (B)
SEBD (B)
Change (B)
Class Sizes (B)
Funding
Time (B)
Resources (B)
Facilities (B)
Curriculum (B)
Teacher exposure (B)
Student exposure (B)
TA Support (B)
School Support (B)
Ideas (F)

Information (F)
Examples (F)
Training (F)
Class Sizes (F)
Funding (F)
Time (F)
Resources (F)
Facilities (F)
Curriculum (F)
TA Support (F)
School Support (F)
Parental support (F)
Government support (F)
Understanding students' circumstances (F)
Understanding students' interests (F)

Supplementary Table 3

Final Cycle Coding & Frequency

Codes (Domain code is related to)	Frequency
CABP is inclusive & accessible (P)	11
CABP creates a safe space (P)	4
CABP provides non-verbal means of expression (P)	5
CABP encourages self expression (P)	10
CABP helps autistic young people develop their imaginative skills (P)	3
CABP can allow autistic young people to develop their confidence (P)	6
CABP helps autistic young people develop their understanding of others (P)	6
CABP helps autistic young people develop their social skills (P)	13
CABP is memorable & engaging (P)	18
CABP encourages multi-sensory engagement (P)	8
CABP is fun (P)	9
CABP is not well suited to everyone (N)	17
CABP requires an individualised approach (N)	5
CABP is overstimulating (N)	6
CABP exposes students (N)	5
CABP is dysregulating (N)	3
What about other students? (N)	3
What about staff? (N)	2
Autistic students lack social cues (N)	2
Autistic students experience friendship challenges (N)	1
Autistic students experience collaborative challenges (N)	3
CABP lacks Predictability (N)	5
Time consuming (N)	3
CABP is hard to Assess (N)	5
CABP is hard to Grasp (N)	2
CABP can be ineffective in certain subjects (N)	5
Teachers lack in CABP Training (B)	3
Teachers lack in CABP Knowledge (B)	6
Teachers lack support in implementing CABP (B)	7

Teachers lack in exposure to CABP (B)	4
Teachers lack in confidence (B)	1
Student Behaviour is a problem (B)	10
Individual differences makes CABP challenging (B)	3
Students have varied interests (B)	4
Students have varied skills (B)	4
CABP can be over-stimulating (B)	2
Change can be hard for autistic students (B)	2
Class Sizes (B)	7
There is not enough funding (B)	2
There is not enough time (B)	10
There is not enough resources (B)	7
Facilities are not good enough (B)	2
The curriculum is too prescriptive (B)	13
Teachers having more ideas (F)	4
Teachers having more information (F)	3
Teachers having more examples (F)	4
Teachers having more training (F)	7
Teachers having more support (F)	10
Understanding students' circumstances (F)	2
Understanding students' interests (F)	4
Class Sizes (F)	4
More funding (F)	4
More time (F)	7
More resources (F)	7
More facilities (F)	5
Curriculum reform (F)	2

Supplementary Table 4

First Cycle Categorisation

Domains	Categories	Codes	Frequency	Meaning Unit
Perceived Positives of CABP with autistic students (<i>n</i> = 93)	Environmental (<i>n</i> = 15)	CABP is inclusive & accessible	11	It makes material accessible without obvious and belittling differentiation.
		CABP creates a safe space	4	The lack of social cues can be problematic in the group work approaches but I think it allows an exploration of alternative perspectives in a safe and controlled environment.
	Personal (<i>n</i> = 15)	CABP provides non-verbal means of expression	5	Art provides a non-verbal expression for autistic students. Many autistic students have obstacles in language communication and it is difficult for them to accurately express their thoughts and feelings in traditional verbal ways. Through art forms such as painting, music, and dance, they can express their emotions and show their inner worlds more freely
		CABP encourages self expression	10	Art provides a platform for the free expression of personal feelings and thoughts, which is especially important for students with autism because it helps them build their self-identity.
	Social (<i>n</i> = 28)	CABP helps autistic young people develop their imaginative skills	3	It can foster creativity and imagination, allowing students to explore different ideas and perspectives
		CABP can allow autistic young people to develop their confidence	6	It also helps build self-esteem. When students create art, they can take pride in their accomplishments and see their own unique abilities.

		CABP helps autistic young people develop their understanding of others	6	Students are able to consider the world from different perspectives and consider a variety of approaches to circumstances.
		CABP helps autistic young people develop their social skills	13	Through art activities, autistic students can participate in creative work with other students, which helps them learn social skills and teamwork.
	Engagement-focused (<i>n</i> = 35)	CABP is memorable & engaging	18	More noteworthy lessons where students better remember and engage.
		CABP encourages multi-sensory engagement	8	It is different from the chalk and talk methods, multi-sensory, fun and active learning
		CABP is fun	9	It sounds like a fun way to learn and if the students are enjoying themselves, they will find learning easier
Perceived Negatives of CABP with autistic students (<i>n</i> = 67)	Individual (<i>n</i> = 36)	CABP is not well suited to everyone	17	I feel it depends highly on the students involved - some of my autistic learners enjoy learning through creative means, others prefer to learn through more traditional methods like textbooks and direct instruction. It fully depends on the individual's interests.
		CABP requires an individualised approach	5	Additionally, it may require more individualised attention and resources, which can be challenging to manage in a mainstream classroom setting.
		CABP is overstimulating	6	the risk of sensory overload from various textures, colours, and noises involved in art activities, which can be overwhelming for some students.
		CABP exposes students	5	Many of the autistic students without ADHD who I have taught in the past have stated that they are uncomfortable with activities that might place them in a situation where they have to verbalise what they think and feel.

	CABP is dysregulating	3	The environment at times can cause students to become unregulated.
Others (n = 5)	What about other students?	3	Will it affect the other students' progression?
	What about staff?	2	it's TIRING for a teacher as you feel like a tv presenter for 5 hours a day 5 days a week
Social (n = 6)	Autistic students lack social cues	2	Some autistic students also throw themselves into it but don't have the awareness of social context and so can say inappropriate things or get into a situation where other students mock them.
	Autistic students experience friendship challenges	1	It can be hard to group autistic students if they have previously had friendship issues.
	Autistic students experience collaborative challenges	3	The collaborative nature of the task was a challenge as many of the autistic students still needed to develop their collaborative skills.
Environmental (n = 8)	CABP lacks Predictability	5	Sometimes, if a creative lesson is not something you do regularly it can upset established routines and it can have a level of unpredictability about outcomes that can be upsetting for some students
	Time consuming	3	Can be a little time consuming to set up.
Educational (n = 12)	CABP is hard to Assess	5	It can be challenging to measure progress and determine if students are meeting specific educational goals. This lack of clear benchmarks may make it difficult for teachers to report on student achievement and for parents to understand their child's progress.
	CABP is hard to Grasp	2	I would also be worried that students wouldn't "get" the important learning outcome that they need to be able to recall (often in a very formulaic precise wording).

		CABP can be ineffective in certain subjects	5	Some science doesn't lend itself well too . I am knowledgeable about exam boards and their content doesn't really test this type of skill so there's a balance to be had.
Perceived Barriers to using CABP with autistic students (n = 87)	Teacher Related Barriers (n = 21)	Teachers lack in CABP Training	3	Lack of relevant training for teachers
		Teachers lack in CABP Knowledge (B)	6	Personal understanding of how to deliver and find examples
		Teachers lack support in implementing CABP	7	There are not enough TA's to support children as it is, let alone when trying to implement creative tasks in an otherwise non-creative subject
		Teachers lack in exposure to CABP	4	Haven't really come across this concept before
		Teachers lack in confidence	1	Teachers are less and less confident delivering 'ambitious' and risky lessons
Student Related Barriers (n = 21)		Student Behaviour is a problem	10	Behaviour issues (not necessarily with autistic students but with others in the room) that make it difficult to adapt to the needs of the autistic students which may be greater during a more creative task, especially the first few times it is done where they may need extra support in navigating the expectations of the task and the change in routine/ lesson structure
		Individual differences makes CABP challenging	3	Autistic students are quite different, and they may have unique difficulties in perception, understanding and expression, which makes it challenging to design creative art activities suitable for each student. Because their special needs and ability level should be fully considered, otherwise the expected teaching effect may not be achieved.
		Students have varied interests	4	Autistic students have different interests and hobbies.

		Students have varied skills	4	Students with autism vary in their interests and artistic abilities, and some students may have no interest in specific art forms at all, or have greater difficulties in some art areas.
Environmental Barriers (n = 11)		CABP can be over-stimulating	2	I also would worry about [...] overstimulation with some students I have taught.
		Change can be hard for autistic students	2	Autistic students may have poor adaptability to changes and new environments, which may affect their acceptance of Art activities.
		Class Sizes	7	Becomes difficult in classes of 30+ students with different needs
Infrastructural barriers (n = 34)		There is not enough funding	2	A limited budget for supplies could hinder me from using creative art-based pedagogy.
		There is not enough time	10	In a busy school schedule, it can be challenging to allocate sufficient time for in-depth art activities.
		There is not enough resources	7	Art activities often require a variety of supplies such as paints, brushes, clay, and paper. These can be expensive and may not be readily available in all schools.
		Facilities are not good enough	2	A lack of dedicated art spaces or facilities can make it hard to conduct art activities in an optimal environment.
		The curriculum is too prescriptive (B)	13	Our curriculum is so pressured that although building students skills for cooperation and contribution are the most important for future success in life, we often have to teach content at the expense of these skills.
Perceived Facilitators to using CABP with autistic students (n = 63)	Teacher related facilitators (n = 28)	Teachers having more ideas	4	Ideas of how to best implement them in STEM subjects which are not inherently geared to creative arts
		Teachers having more information	3	Seeing data and evidence of how this supports and encourages
		Teachers having more examples	4	Seeing more examples on practice by someone who uses it a lot and is an expert

	Teachers having more training	7	Participate in professional training courses on art education for students with autism, understand the characteristics of autism and how to better combine creative art teaching methods with it.
	Teachers having more support	10	A supportive environment from colleagues and school administration would encourage me to use creative art-based pedagogy.
Student related facilitators (n = 6)	Understanding students' circumstances	2	Working with students with autism will require you to understand their unique personalities and needs
	Understanding students' interests	4	A personalised learning plan is developed for each autistic student, taking into account their interests, abilities and learning styles.
Environmental facilitators (n = 4)	Class Sizes	4	smaller class sizes
Infrastructural facilitators (n = 25)	More funding	4	More budget
	More time	7	Having more time to plan these lessons as well as the mental space to come up with ideas
	More resources	7	Quality equipment. Most staff supply their own felt tip pens. We can make 1 purchase of stuff per year.
	More facilities	5	having larger classrooms or ability to book spaces to work in.
	Curriculum reform	2	Reform of the curriculum to focus on outcomes being students skilled in cooperation and contribution.

Supplementary Table 5

Second Cycle Categorisation

Domains	Categories	Codes	Frequency	Meaning Unit
How do teachers in mainstream secondary schools perceive CABP in the context of teaching autistic students? (n = 162)	Personal (n = 31)	CABP provides non-verbal means of expression (P)	5	Art provides a non-verbal expression way for autistic students. Many autistic students have obstacles in language communication and it is difficult for them to accurately express their thoughts and feelings in traditional verbal ways. Through art forms such as painting, music, and dance, they can express their emotions and show their inner worlds more freely
		CABP encourages self expression (P)	10	Art provides a platform for the free expression of personal feelings and thoughts, which is especially important for students with autism because it helps them build their self-identity.
		CABP is overstimulating (N)	8	The risk of sensory overload from various textures, colours, and noises involved in art activities, which can be overwhelming for some students.
		CABP exposes students (N)	5	Many of the autistic students without ADHD who I have taught in the past have stated that they are uncomfortable with activities that might place them in a situation where they have to verbalise what they think and feel. Other autistic students are very comfortable with this style of teaching and learning, usually those with ADHD as well, but not always.
		CABP is dysregulating (N)	3	The environment at times can cause students to become unregulated.
	Individual (n = 27)	CABP is not well suited to everyone (N)	17	I feel it depends highly on the students involved - some of my autistic learners enjoy learning through creative means, others prefer to learn through more traditional methods like textbooks and direct instruction. It fully depends on the individual's interests.
		CABP requires an individualised approach	5	Additionally, it may require more individualised attention and resources, which can be challenging to manage in a mainstream classroom setting.

	(N)		
	What about other students? (N)	3	Will it affect the other students' progression?
	What about staff? (N)	2	it's TIRING for a teacher as you feel like a tv presenter for 5 hours a day 5 days a week
Social (<i>n</i> = 34)	CABP helps autistic young people develop their imaginative skills (P)	3	It can foster creativity and imagination, allowing students to explore different ideas and perspectives
	CABP can allow autistic young people to develop their confidence (P)	6	It also helps build self-esteem. When students create art, they can take pride in their accomplishments and see their own unique abilities.
	CABP helps autistic young people develop their understanding of others (P)	6	Students are able to consider the world from different perspectives and consider a variety of approaches to circumstances.
	CABP helps autistic young people develop their social skills (P)	13	Through art activities, autistic students can participate in creative work with other students, which helps them learn social skills and teamwork.
	Autistic students lack social cues (N)	2	Some autistic students also throw themselves into it but don't have the awareness of social context and so can say inappropriate things or get into a situation where other students mock them.
	Autistic students experience friendship challenges (N)	1	It can be hard to group autistic students if they have previously had friendship issues.
	Autistic students	3	The collaborative nature of the task was a challenge as many of the autistic

	experience collaborative challenges (N)		students still needed to develop their collaborative skills.
Context for Learning (<i>n</i> = 70)	CABP is memorable & engaging (P)	18	More noteworthy lessons where students better remember and engage.
	CABP encourages multi-sensory engagement (P)	8	It is different from the chalk and talk methods, multi-sensory, fun and active learning
	CABP is fun (P)	9	It sounds like a fun way to learn and if the students are enjoying themselves, they will find learning easier
	CABP is inclusive & accessible (P)	11	It makes material accessible without obvious and belittling differentiation.
	CABP creates a safe space (P)	4	The lack of social cues can be problematic in the group work approaches but I think it allows an exploration of alternative perspectives in a safe and controlled environment.
	CABP lacks Predictability (N)	5	Sometimes, if a creative lesson is not something you do regularly it can upset established routines and it can have a level of unpredictability about outcomes that can be upsetting for some students
	Time consuming (N)	3	can be a little time consuming to set up.
	CABP is hard to Assess (N)	5	It can be challenging to measure progress and determine if students are meeting specific educational goals. This lack of clear benchmarks may make it difficult for teachers to report on student achievement and for parents to understand their child's progress.
	CABP is hard to Grasp (N)	2	I would also be worried that students wouldn't "get" the important learning outcome that they need to be able to recall (often in a very formulaic precise wording).
	CABP can be ineffective in certain subjects (N)	5	Some science doesn't lend itself well too . I am knowledgeable of exam boards and their content doesn't really test this type of skill so there's a balance to be had.

What do teachers in secondary mainstream schools report as barriers and facilitators to using CABP with autistic students? (n = 145)	Teacher Related (n = 21)	Teachers lack in exposure to CABP (B)	4	Haven't really come across this concept before
		Teachers lack in CABP Knowledge (B)	6	Personal understanding of how to deliver and find examples
		Teachers having more ideas (F)	4	Ideas of how to best implement them in STEM subjects which are not inherently geared to creative arts
		Teachers having more information (F)	3	Seeing data and evidence of how this supports and encourages
		Teachers having more examples (F)	4	seeing more examples on practice by someone who uses it a lot and is an expert
Student related (n = 27)	Student Behaviour is a problem (B)	Student Behaviour is a problem (B)	10	Behaviour issues (not necessarily with autistic students but with others in the room) that make it difficult to adapt to the needs of the autistic students which may be greater during a more creative task, especially the first few times it is done where they may need extra support in navigating the expectations of the task and the change in routine/ lesson structure
		Individual differences makes CABP challenging (B)	3	autistic students are quite different, and they may have unique difficulties in perception, understanding and expression, which makes it challenging to design creative art activities suitable for each student. Because their special needs and ability level should be fully considered, otherwise the expected teaching effect may not be achieved.
		Students have varied interests (B)	4	Autistic students have different interests and hobbies.
		Students have varied skills (B)	4	Students with autism vary in their interests and artistic abilities, and some students may have no interest in specific art forms at all, or have greater difficulties in some art areas.
		Understanding students' circumstances (F)	2	Working with students with autism will require you to understand their unique personalities and needs
		Understanding students'	4	A personalised learning plan is developed for each autistic student, taking into

	interests (F)		account their interests, abilities and learning styles.
Infrastructural (n = 97)	Class Sizes (B, F)	11	Becomes difficult in classes of 30+ students with different needs smaller class sizes
	Funding (B, F)	6	A limited budget for supplies could hinder me from using creative art-based pedagogy. Having enough students to justify the expense.
	Time (B, F)	17	There is also very little spare time available in the curriculum. Having more time to plan these lessons as well as the mental space to come up with ideas
	Resources (B, F)	14	Art activities often require a variety of supplies such as paints, brushes, clay, and paper. These can be expensive and may not be readily available in all schools. Quality equipment. Most staff supply their own felt tip pens. We can make 1 purchase of stuff per year.
	Facilities (B, F)	18	A lack of dedicated art spaces or facilities can make it hard to conduct art activities in an optimal environment. having larger classrooms or ability to book spaces to work in.
	Curriculum (B, F)	15	Our curriculum is so pressured that although building students skills for cooperation and contribution are the most important for future success in life, we often have to teach content at the expense of these skills. Reform of the curriculum to focus on outcomes being students skilled in cooperation and contribution.

Training (B, F)

10

Lack of relevant training for teachers

Participate in professional training courses on art education for students with autism, understand the characteristics of autism and how to better combine creative art teaching methods with it.

Support (B, F)

17

There are not enough TA's to support children as it is, let alone when trying to implement creative tasks in an otherwise non-creative subject

A supportive environment from colleagues and school administration would encourage me to use creative art-based pedagogy.

Supplementary Table 6

Final Cycle Categorisation

Categories	Sub-Categories	Codes	Frequency	Meaning Unit
Teachers' perceptions of autistic students' experiences of CABP (n = 78)	Benefits in student's experience (n = 50)	CABP is memorable & engaging	18	More noteworthy lessons where students better remember and engage.
		CABP is inclusive & accessible	11	Caters to their strengths as visual learners, making abstract concepts more concrete and understandable. [...] Overall, integrating art into lessons promotes inclusion and enhances comprehension for autistic students.
		CABP is fun	9	It sounds like a fun way to learn and if the students are enjoying themselves, they will find learning easier
		CABP encourages multi-sensory engagement	8	It is different from the chalk and talk methods, multi-sensory, fun and active learning
		CABP creates a safe space	4	It can offer a safe and predictable environment.
	Student experience associated risks (n = 28)	CABP can be overstimulating	8	The noise of a creative based classroom can be over stimulating for some autistic students
		CABP can be exposing	5	Students may be reluctant to get involved or to join in publicly in class.
		CABP can be unpredictable	5	Sometimes, if a creative lesson is not something you do regularly it can upset established routines and it can have a level of unpredictability about outcomes that can be upsetting for some students
		CABP can be dysregulating	3	The environment at times can cause students to become unregulated.
		Group-work / collaboration in CABP	7	The collaborative nature of the task was a challenge as many of the autistic students still needed to develop their collaborative skills.

		can be challenging		
Teachers' perceptions of the role of CABP in the personal development of autistic students (n = 43)		CABP provides opportunities for non-verbal self-expression	15	Art provides a non-verbal expression way for autistic students. Many autistic students have obstacles in language communication and it is difficult for them to accurately express their thoughts and feelings in traditional verbal ways. Through art forms such as painting, music, and dance, they can express their emotions and show their inner worlds more freely
		CABP helps autistic young people develop their social skills	13	Through art activities, autistic students can participate in creative work with other students, which helps them learn social skills and teamwork. It can bridge the gap between autistic students and their neurotypical peers. When all students participate in art activities, it can promote understanding and acceptance.
		CABP can allow autistic young people to develop their confidence	6	It can enhance their self-confidence.
		CABP helps autistic young people develop their understanding of others	6	Students are able to consider the world from different perspectives and consider a variety of approaches to circumstances.
		CABP helps autistic young people develop their imaginative skills	3	Promote imagination
Teacher identified barriers &	Teacher associated barriers &	Teachers lack in exposure to CABP (B) ³	4	Haven't really come across this concept before
		Teachers lack in CABP	6	Personal understanding of how to deliver and find examples

³ (B) = Barrier; (F) = Facilitator

facilitators to using CABP with autistic students in a mainstream secondary school context (n = 182)	facilitators (n = 21)	Knowledge (B)		
		Teachers having more ideas (F)	4	Ideas of how to best implement them in STEM subjects which are not inherently geared to creative arts
		Teachers having more information (F)	3	Seeing data and evidence of how this supports and encourages
		Teachers having more examples (F)	4	seeing more examples on practice by someone who uses it a lot and is an expert
	Student associated barriers & facilitators (n = 27)	Student Behaviour is a problem (B)	10	Behaviour issues (not necessarily with autistic students but with others in the room) that make it difficult to adapt to the needs of the autistic students which may be greater during a more creative task, especially the first few times it is done where they may need extra support in navigating the expectations of the task and the change in routine/ lesson structure
		Individual differences makes CABP challenging (B)	3	autistic students are quite different, and they may have unique difficulties in perception, understanding and expression, which makes it challenging to design creative art activities suitable for each student. Because their special needs and ability level should be fully considered, otherwise the expected teaching effect may not be achieved.
		Students have varied interests (B)	4	Autistic students have different interests and hobbies.
		Students have varied skills (B)	4	Students with autism vary in their interests and artistic abilities, and some students may have no interest in specific art forms at all, or have greater difficulties in some art areas.
		Understanding students' circumstances (F)	2	Working with students with autism will require you to understand their unique personalities and needs
		Understanding students' interests (F)	4	A personalised learning plan is developed for each autistic student, taking into account their interests, abilities and learning styles.

Teaching and learning associate barriers (n = 29)	CABP is not inclusive to all (B)	17	they might not like to express themselves in that way to which would make it impossible to take part and therefore get defiance “codes” or end up sent to internal exclusion. My son is in year 7 and gets on extremely well in dance and drama but I could imagine if the child wasn’t interested then it could cause conflict.
	CABP requires an individualised approach (B)	5	Additionally, it may require more individualised attention and resources, which can be challenging to manage in a mainstream classroom setting.
	CABP results in subjective assessments (B)	5	Fuzzy evaluation criteria: the evaluation of artistic works is often subjective, which may lead to inaccurate and objective evaluation of students' learning achievements.
	CABP can be hard for students to grasp (B)	2	I would also be worried that students wouldn't "get" the important learning outcome that they need to be able to recall (often in a very formulaic precise wording)
Infrastructural barriers & facilitators (n = 105)	Class size (B, F)	11	Becomes difficult in classes of 30+ students with different needs smaller class sizes
	Funding (B, F)	6	A limited budget for supplies could hinder me from using creative art-based pedagogy. Having enough students to justify the expense.
	Time (B, F)	17	There is also very little spare time available in the curriculum. Having more time to plan these lessons as well as the mental space to come up with ideas
	Resources (B, F)	14	Art activities often require a variety of supplies such as paints, brushes, clay, and paper. These can be expensive and may not be readily available in all schools.

		Quality equipment. Most staff supply their own felt tip pens. We can make 1 purchase of stuff per year.
Facilities (B, F)	18	A lack of dedicated art spaces or facilities can make it hard to conduct art activities in an optimal environment. having larger classrooms or ability to book spaces to work in.
Curriculum & subjects (B, F)	15	Our curriculum is so pressured that although building students skills for cooperation and contribution are the most important for future success in life, we often have to teach content at the expense of these skills. Reform of the curriculum to focus on outcomes being students skilled in cooperation and contribution.
Training (B, F)	10	Lack of relevant training for teachers Participate in professional training courses on art education for students with autism, understand the characteristics of autism and how to better combine creative art teaching methods with it.
Support (B, F)	17	There are not enough TA's to support children as it is, let alone when trying to implement creative tasks in an otherwise non-creative subject A supportive environment from colleagues and school administration would encourage me to use creative art-based pedagogy.

Appendices

Appendix A - Ethical Approval for empirical studies



Department of Education Ethics Committee
University of York
Email: education-research-admin@york.ac.uk

1 July 2024

Kayleigh Doyle (PhD)
Department of Education
University of York

Dear Kayleigh

Full ethical approval for: Creative Art-based Pedagogy. Ref FC24/2
Data protection registration number: Z4855807

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Thank you for your application to the Education Ethics Committee (EEC) for ethics approval for Creative Art-based Pedagogy as part of your studies for the PhD programme in the Department of Education. I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved.

COVID-19

Please ensure that you adhere to the latest University of York COVID-19 guidance when undertaking your research.

[Coronavirus \(Covid-19\) information - Resources, guidance and policies \(york.ac.uk\)](#)

ONGOING RESPONSIBILITIES

It is your responsibility to notify the Education Ethics Committee if any unforeseen ethical changes or problems arise during the course of your research (for example, but not limited to: any amendments to research design, methods of data collection or any other feature or component of the research etc.; a complaint from any person involved or affected by your research). You are required to adhere to all data management and storage procedures as outlined in your application. It is your responsibility to adhere to all aspects of GDPR:

[Data Protection - Records Management and Information Governance, University of York](#)

If there are any ethics queries, or to request amendments to your project, please contact: education-research-admin@york.ac.uk

For data protection enquiries, please contact the data protection team: data.protection@york.ac.uk

Please follow the Visitor Policy at the data collection site (where applicable). Thank you.

We wish you every success with your research. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries. Thank you.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Cylcia Bolibaugh'.

Dr Cylcia Bolibaugh
Chair of the Department of Education Ethics Committee

Appendix B - Data Management Plan (DMP) for empirical studies

Plan Overview

A Data Management Plan created using DMPonline

Title: Creative art-based pedagogies: Co-producing a manifesto.

Creator: Kayleigh Doyle

Affiliation: University of York

Template: York DMP Template for Postgraduate Researcher Projects

ID: 139603

Start date: 01-02-2024

End date: 31-07-2024

Last modified: 11-12-2023

Creative art-based pedagogies: Co-producing a manifesto.

1. Defining your data

1a. What data will you create or use?

Qualitative questionnaire responses (.sheets), Audio (.MP4), video recording (generated via Zoom however not saved or stored) and transcripts from these recordings (.doc; .word; .PDF).

1b. Who owns the data you will create or use?

Kayleigh Doyle; Lisa E. Kim and Kathryn Asbury will have access

1c. Are there any ethical or legal considerations relating to the data you will create or use?

Yes.

Please see below sections for details. Further, if any sensitive information, or information of concern is disclosed by interview participants, it will be reported to the local authority if relevant.

2. Working with your data

2a. How much data storage will you require during your project's lifetime?(tick the storage requirement you estimate for your project)

- < 250GB

2b. Where will your data be stored for the duration of the project?(tick the storage option(s) you have chosen to use)

- University of York Google Drive

2c. How will your data be backed up?

Google Drive automatically backs up data and files.

2d. How will you manage access to your data and its security?

The Google Drive will be shared between Kayleigh Doyle and Lisa E. Kim (PhD Supervisor) only. Nobody else will have access.

2e. How will you organise your data?

Data will be organised by code number; for example: S1, S2, S3 (Student 1, 2, 3) or T1, T2, T3 (Teacher 1, 2, 3).

2f. How will your data be documented and described?

Data will be organised by code number; for example: S1, S2, S3 (Student 1, 2, 3) or T1, T2, T3 (Teacher 1, 2, 3). This code number will be stored in a separate folder and will be used to link participants' contact details to their data. Within each folder, there will be a number of documents:

Folder Name: Student Data

Sub-folder Name: S(n)

Document 1: S(n) Audio file

Document 2: S(n) Interview Transcript

Folder Name: Teacher Data

Sub-folder Name: T(n)

Document 1: T(n) Questionnaire Response

Document 2: T(n) Focus Group Audio File (where relevant)

Document 2: T(n) Focus Group Transcript (where relevant)

Folder Name: Identifiable Information

Spreadsheet 1: Student Contact Details, consent form confirmation and Code Number

Spreadsheet 2: Teacher Contact Details, consent form confirmation and Code Number for Focus Groups

Sub-Folder Name: Incentives

Spreadsheet 1: Student Focus Group Voucher by code number

Spreadsheet 1: Teacher Focus Group Voucher by code number

Spreadsheet 3: Teacher Questionnaire Voucher Lottery Names and Contact Details

Folder Name: Anonymous Data Analysis

3. Archiving your data

3a. Which data will be retained long-term?

Anonymised interview transcripts

3b. Where will you deposit the data?(tick the data repository/archive you have chosen or are required to use)

- Other repository/archival system (please provide details below)

Data will remain in the University of York Google Drive. The data will not be openly shared and will only be retained for 5 years.

4. Sharing your data

4a. Will the data you archive be openly shared?

- No (please explain why the data cannot be openly shared below)

Participants are 11-18, therefore a number are under 16 and will therefore only be able to provide assent, rather than consent. It would not, therefore, be ethical to openly share their qualitative data. The project will be pre-registered on OSF, including the materials, however collected data will not be openly shared.

4b. What access restrictions will be imposed on the data you archive?

Kayleigh Doyle and Lisa E. Kim will be the only people with access to the shared google drive.

5. Implementing your plan

5a. Who is responsible for implementing your plan?

Kayleigh Doyle

5b. How will your plan be kept up-to-date?

It will be reviewed at the end of the research process, and at the end of Kayleigh Doyle's PhD.

5c. What training or further information will you need to successfully manage your research data throughout the project?

University of York Cyber Security Training
University of York GDPR Training

Appendix C - Request for teacher participants



Department of
Education

**TEACHER
PARTICIPANTS
NEEDED!**

* Responses from
autistic teachers
are particularly
welcome.



CO-PRODUCING A MANIFESTO TEACHER STUDY

**WHAT AM I
RESEARCHING?**

CREATIVE ART-BASED PEDAGOGY (CABP)!

Rather than a subject in itself, CABP is a teaching technique that could be used in both creative and non-creative subjects; it uses the creative arts (drama, music, dance, art, creative language) as tools to teach curriculum content.

A popular example:

Children learn the alphabet through the ABC song.

**WHAT IS THE
RESEARCH?**

I am collecting data from two sources: teachers in mainstream schools and autistic young people. I want to find out the perspectives of autistic young people and teachers on CABP and the factors that could promote the use of CABP in mainstream secondary schools in England.

**SO, WHO AM I
LOOKING FOR?**

TO DO WHAT?

Participant criteria:

- Qualified teacher
- currently has a job teaching in a mainstream secondary school
- Practices teaching in England
- Is at any level in their teaching career

A questionnaire (that will take up to 15 minutes based on the depth of your answers) and (should you wish) a follow up focus group to discuss the findings from this study, and the student study.

**WHAT SHOULD
YOU DO NEXT?**

To find out more and to sign up to participate, please the [link](#) or the QR code:

https://york.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9uAdon9qns0aOQm



Appendix D - Teacher study, information for participants

Information Page

Creative Art-Based Pedagogies (CABP): Co-producing a manifesto

Kayleigh Doyle is currently carrying out a research project titled: Creative Art-Based Pedagogies (CABP): Co-producing a manifesto. I would like to invite you to take part in this research project.

Before agreeing to take part, please read this information sheet carefully and let us know if anything is unclear or you would like further information.

For information about General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) please follow the link: https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/gdpr_information/

Purpose of the study

The study is designed to gather the perspectives of teachers on creative arts-based pedagogy (CABP) for students with autism, and to explore factors that could promote the use of CABP in mainstream secondary schools. This study takes the form of an open-text online questionnaire. An online teacher focus group will follow the questionnaire, for those who wish to continue their participation, to examine an educational manifesto co-produced by autistic students. This focus group is a voluntary addition to the participation process, only for those who have the time and ability to participate. There will be a question at the end asking you to provide your details should you wish to.

What would this mean for you?

Your involvement in the study should take no more than 30 minutes and will likely take less time than that. Should you continue to the next page, you will be greeted with a range of interview questions about CABP. The majority of the questions will be open text based, meaning you can provide answers by typing in the provided box in as much or little detail as you would like, you are in control of how long you spend on your participation. I will be collecting qualitative data, meaning I will be analysing the text-based data you provide in response to the questions asked.

Should you decide to participate, you will be entered into a lottery and provided the chance to win one of three £20 Amazon vouchers!

Should you decide to also participate in the focus group, once your identity has been verified, you will receive a £10 Amazon voucher to thank you for your time!

Participation is voluntary

Participation is optional. If you do decide to take part, keep a copy of this information sheet for your records. You will also be asked to complete a consent form on the next page. If you

change your mind at any point during the study, you will be able to withdraw your participation without having to provide a reason.

Anonymity and confidentiality

The data that you provide will be stored by code number. Any information that identifies you will be stored separately from the data. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time during data collection and up to 4 weeks after the data is collected.

Storing and using your data

Data will be stored in a University of York google drive. Data will be fully anonymous from the point of data collection, unless you wish to provide your contact information so you can be invited to partake in the focus group. Should you wish to do so, your contact information will be stored separately to your data therefore data will be anonymised after data collection and analysis is completed.

Anonymised data will be kept for 5 years after which time it will be destroyed.

The data that I collect may be used in an anonymous format in different ways, e.g. publications, presentations and online. Please indicate on the consent form if you are happy for this anonymised data to be used in the ways listed.

Questions or concerns

If you have any questions about this participant information sheet or concerns about how your data is being processed, please feel free to contact Kayleigh Doyle by email (kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk) or the Chair of Ethics Committee via email education-research-admin@york.ac.uk. If you are still dissatisfied, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@york.ac.uk

I hope that you will agree to take part. If you are happy to participate, please complete the consent and questionnaire form that follows. Please keep this information sheet for your own records.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

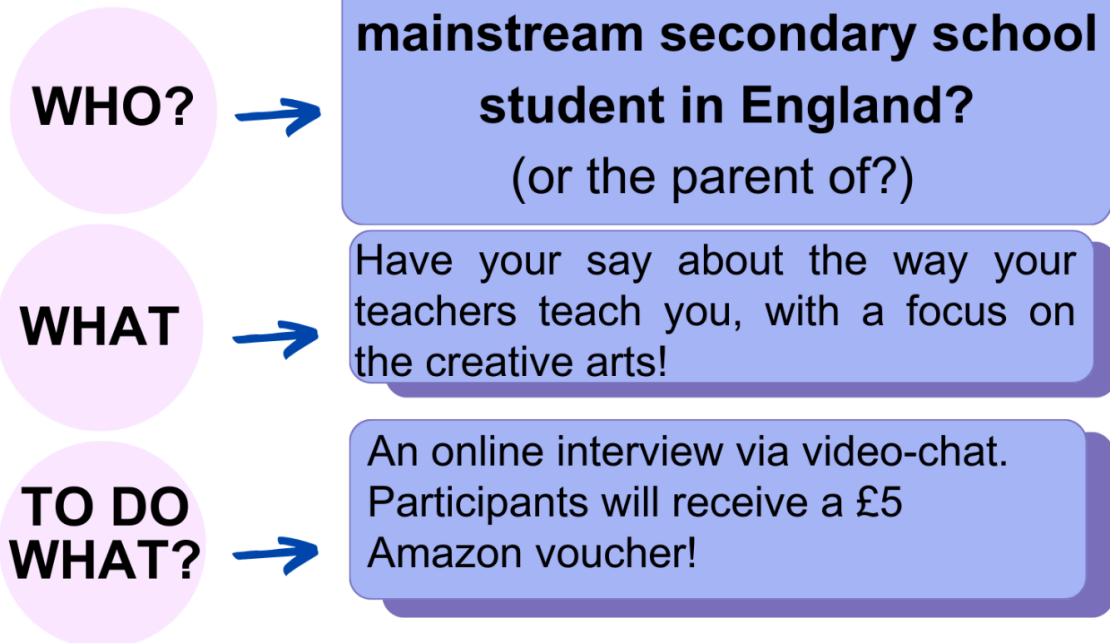
Yours sincerely
Kayleigh Doyle

Appendix E - Teacher study, consent form

Please answer the following questions; in doing so, you are providing your consent for participation in the current study:

Statement of consent	Drop down options
I confirm that I have read and understood the information given to me about the above-named research project and I understand that this will involve me/my child taking part as described above.	I confirm I do not confirm
I confirm that I am a teacher, working in a mainstream school in England.	I confirm I do not confirm
I understand that participation in this study is voluntary, and that if I wish to withdraw, I can do so at any time during data collection and up to 4 weeks after the data is collected.	I understand I do not understand
I understand that my data will not be identifiable and the anonymous data may be used in publications, presentations and online.	I understand I do not understand
I consent to my anonymised data being kept for 5 years after which time it will be destroyed	I consent I do not consent
I confirm that I have read the information about GDPR.	I confirm I do not confirm
Bearing all of that in mind, I consent to taking part in the study as described in the information above.	I consent I do not consent

Appendix F - Request for autistic student participants



To find out more and to sign up to participate, please follow the link or the QR code

Parent / Carer

<https://forms.gle/TyjwbEj4prkW3YJi6>



Participant

<https://forms.gle/imPSMgQxPK1qwhMt8>



Please note, for you to be allowed to participate, I will need consent from both you and your parent / carer.

please note, all communication prior to the interview itself with individuals under the age of 16 must be overseen by a parent or carer. If you are an autistic student and you have questions about this study, please ask your parent or carer to email me on kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk. Any emails or social media messages received from individuals under 16 will not be responded to.

Information Sheet

Creative Art-Based Pedagogies

A bit about me!

- Name: Kayleigh
- Age: 25
- Pronouns: She/Her
- Any pets? A puppy!
- What am I interested in? I have spent the last 10 years working with lots of different types of people in lots of different educational settings, my favourite times have always been when we are making things and having fun!

What is Research?

Research is the gathering and piecing together of information from different places, like books, the internet, and experts (that means you!) to understand a topic better. Usually there is a question you are trying to answer, that has not been answered before.

The Topic of this Research is...

Creative Art-Based Pedagogy (CABP) ... Let's break that down!

Creative Art

The creative arts encourage you to use your imagination, and spark creativity through various practices such as drama, dance, music, creative language (poetry, creative writing) and art.

Pedagogy

Pedagogy is a big word with a very simple meaning! It is the science of teaching and education, and it involves methods and techniques that teachers use to help students learn and understand various subjects in the classroom.

Creative Art-Based Pedagogy

CABP is a teaching technique that uses the creative arts. For example, it is likely that you learned the alphabet in primary school by learning the ABC song - that is CABP! I want to know if and how this could work in mainstream secondary schools, for students with autism.

This is where you come in!

Why You?

I really care about hearing how autistic students in mainstream secondary schools feel about their experience of pedagogy in the classroom, in every subject. I think your voice is the most important to my research!

With that being said, everything we chat about or you create will be completely anonymous - no one will ever know who said what!

The Important Bits!

Participation is voluntary

It is up to you if you want to take part or not. If you decide to take part, keep a copy of this information for your records. I also ask that you complete a consent form. You are allowed to withdraw from the study at any time up until you approve the final transcript, without having to provide a reason, by emailing kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk

Anonymity and confidentiality

No one will know who said what. What you say will be fully anonymised and stored by number, not your name, after transcription is completed. Any information that identifies you or you will be stored in a different place to your transcript.

Storing and using your data

The anonymous transcript will be stored on a google drive, which will only be accessible by me and my supervisor. We will keep the anonymous transcripts for 5 years after which time it will be destroyed.

Your anonymous transcript may be used in different ways. Please let me know on the consent form if you are happy for this anonymised data to be used in the ways listed.

Questions or concerns

If you have any questions about this information sheet or concerns about how your data is being processed, please feel free to contact Kayleigh Doyle by email kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk, or the Chair of Ethics Committee by email education-research-admin@york.ac.uk. If you are still dissatisfied, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@york.ac.uk

For information about General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) please follow the link: https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/gdpr_information/

Contact Information

Contact Name: Kayleigh Doyle

Contact Email Address: Kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk

Reminder: It is up to you whether you want to join in!

If you do want to, keep this digital information sheet handy so you can remember how to get in touch with me! You will also need to read and sign the consent google form. If you change your mind and don't want to join in any more, that is okay! you can tell me (and I do not need to know why!) Just send me an email using the email address above.

Appendix H - Autistic student study, information for participants (poster)



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Department of
Education

CABP

**WHO
AM I AND
WHAT IS
RESEARCH?**

Name: **Kayleigh**

Age: **25**

Pronouns: **She/Her**

Any pets? **A puppy!**

What am I interested in?



I have spent the last 10 years working with lots of different types of people in lots of different educational settings, my favourite times have always been when we are making things and having fun!

Contact Name:
Kayleigh Doyle

Contact Email Address:
Kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk

Once you have read this information sheet, please return to the [Participant Google Form](#) or the [Parent / Carer Google Form](#)

WHAT IS RESEARCH?

Research is the gathering and piecing together of information from different places, like books, the internet, and experts (that means you!) to understand a topic better. Usually there is a question you are trying to answer, that has not been answered before.



DEFINITIONS

CREATIVE ARTS

“Creative Arts” covers a number of activities, such as music, dance, drama, art (such as drawing, painting, crafting etc), and creative language (such as poetry, story writing etc).

PEDAGOGY

Pedagogy is a fancy word for teaching method. It is not talking about what teachers teach, but about how teachers teach. For example, two teachers would have different pedagogies if one stood at the front of the class and taught you whilst you sat and listened, and the other engaged you in group work with your peers, and walked around asking questions and creating games to help your learning.

CREATIVE ARTS-BASED PEDAGOGY

Creative arts-based pedagogy is a way of teaching that uses the creative arts. Some examples include:

- Teaching the alphabet through the ABC song
- Using a hot-seating activity to teach facts about a historical figure.
- Using movement/dance to teach about geometric shapes

MANIFESTO

A manifesto tells the reader our plans, goals, and beliefs. It's like a plan of action, often used to outline what a group of people stand for, and what they aim to achieve. It will include:

- An overview of the groups beliefs about a topic
- A list of objectives related to the topic
- An action plan, based on what the group believes are valuable next steps related to the topic

Usually, a manifesto includes inspiring, powerful language, and it is a public document, meaning everyone can know what the group stands for.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?



Department of Education



CABP

WHAT AM I RESEARCHING?

I want to know if and how creative arts based pedagogy could work in mainstream secondary schools with autistic students.

Research has shown us that the creative arts can help students to learn, show their emotions and make friends. I want to know how you feel about creative arts, and if you think that is true for you and other autistic students. I would also love to hear about any times your teachers might (or might not!) have taught you using CABP.

By taking part in this research, you can have your say on things that you like and things that you don't like about the way your teachers teach you and other autistic students in your school, and you have the opportunity to tell us what you would like to change. Though the results of this research will stay 'anonymous', you will have played a part in creating a 'manifesto' of changes that autistic students would like to see in the way their teachers teach them!

WHY SHOULD YOU TAKE PART?

WHO AM I LOOKING FOR?

Students enrolled and attending a 'mainstream' secondary school who also have an autism diagnosis

TO DO WHAT?

An online interview via video-chat. (if you would prefer to meet in person, please do let me know and we will see what we can do!)

All participants will receive a £5 Amazon voucher! Please see the consent form for further details.

WHAT DOES TAKING PART LOOK LIKE?



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Education



CABP

PART 1: INTERVIEW

The first thing I will do is get in touch to arrange a good time to meet and have a chat with you via video call. on the call, I will ask you some questions to get your opinion (I will send you the questions before hand so you can have a look at them first), and you can ask me any questions you might have about the research.

If you would like, an adult from home can join us too!

Once I have made a written copy of our chat, I will share it with you so you can let me know if there is anything else you would like to add.

If you take part in the interview, you will receive a £5
Amazon voucher!

PART 2: THE MANIFESTO

Once I have had a chat with you and anyone else taking part, I will put all of your responses together to produce what I am calling a *manifesto*!

Basically, this will let people know how we feel about *pedagogy* and what we want to change. Because all of our ideas have communally produced the *manifesto*, you will be called a co-producer of the manifesto (though everything is anonymous!)

Participation is voluntary

It is up to you if you want to take part or not. If you decide to take part, keep a copy of this information for your records. I also ask that you complete a consent form. You are allowed to withdraw from the study at any time up until you approve the final transcript, without having to provide a reason, by emailing kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk

Anonymity and confidentiality

No one will know who said what. What you say will be fully anonymised and stored by number, not your name, after transcription is completed. Any information that identifies you or you will be stored in a different place to your transcript.

Storing and using your data

The anonymous transcript will be stored on a google drive, which will only be accessible by me and my supervisor. We will keep the anonymous transcripts for 5 years after which time it will be destroyed.

Your anonymous transcript may be used in different ways. Please let me know on the consent form if you are happy for this anonymised data to be used in the ways listed.

Questions or concerns

If you have any questions about this information sheet or concerns about how your data is being processed, please feel free to contact Kayleigh Doyle by email kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk, or the Chair of Ethics Committee by email education-research-admin@york.ac.uk. If you are still dissatisfied, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@york.ac.uk

For information about General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) please follow the link: https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/gdpr_information/

Appendix I - Autistic student study, information for participants ([Video](#) & [Audio](#))

Participation is voluntary



Storing and using your data



Questions or concerns



kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk
education-research-admin@york.ac.uk
dataprotection@york.ac.uk

Anonymity and confidentiality



Appendix J - Autistic student study, parent/carer consent form

Creative Art-Based Pedagogies Information and Consent Form - Parent / Carer

Dear Parent / Carer of a potential participant, your child is invited to take part in a (approximately) 1 hour interview. If they want to take part, please ensure you read, watch or listen to the project information by following one (or all!) of the links below:

[PDF poster style](#)

[PDF plain text](#)

Audio

Video

If you still wish for your child to proceed with taking part in this research once you have read, seen or heard the information about this project via one of the links above, please fill out the following consent form.

Please note, this consent form is for **parents / carers** only, if you are a participant, please fill out the participant consent form by following this [link](#). You will only be able to partake once I have received consent from both your parent / carer, and you.

** Indicates required question*

1. I confirm that I have read, seen or heard and understood the information given *
to me about the creative art-based pedagogy research project and I understand that this will involve my child taking part as described in the information I have read, seen or heard.

Mark only one oval.

I confirm

I do not confirm

2. I understand that participation in this study is voluntary and that my child has the * right to withdraw at any time during data collection and up until your child approve the final transcript, without having to provide a reason, by emailing kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk

Mark only one oval.

- I understand
 I do not understand

3. The following two steps have been designed to enable the researchers to remove any potential scammers from the interview process and thereby ensure the integrity of the collected data:

1. If the interview is online, participants (and parents / carers if they are also attending the interview) will be asked to turn on their camera at the start of the interview, before the recording is started. This will enable the researcher to see the participant and ensure they are interviewed only once. Participants will be asked to confirm whether they would like cameras to remain turned on or turned off before the interview recording begins.

2. A number of verification questions will be asked as part of the interview introduction, to ensure all participants do, infact, fit within the participant selection criteria.

Please note that the interview may be stopped at any time should the researcher feel the participant is falsely claiming to fit within the participant selection criteria thus providing inaccurate / misleading information. Your child would then not receive a £5* Amazon voucher.

*One voucher per young person; no vouchers are available for parents of participants

Mark only one oval.

- I understand
 I do not understand

4. I understand that my child's data will not be identifiable and the anonymous data * may be used in publications, presentations and online, or in future analysis.

Mark only one oval.

- I understand
 I do not understand

5. I consent to my child's anonymised data being kept for 5 years after which time it will be destroyed

Mark only one oval.

- I consent
 I do not consent

6. I confirm that I have read the information about GDPR *

Mark only one oval.

- I confirm
 I do not confirm

7. Bearing all of that in mind, I consent to my child taking part in the study as * described in the information I read, watched or listened to.

Mark only one oval.

- I consent
 I do not consent

8. What is your preferred method of contact prior to the interview? (multiple selection) *

Mark only one oval.

- Email *Skip to question 10*
- Phone call *Skip to question 9*
- Video call (video on) *Skip to question 10*
- Video call (video off) *Skip to question 10*

Untitled section

phone

9. If your preferred method of contact is via the phone, please provide me a phone number to contact you on

Skip to question 10

Untitled section

Email

10. Please provide me with an email address that it is best to contact you on. Your child will also receive all correspondence. *

11. Do you have any questions for me? I will aim to respond to all questions via the email address provided above as soon as possible.

12. What is your full legal name?

13. What is the full legal name of your child who is filling out a consent form? *

Demographic Data

In-line with guidance from the American Psychological Association, I am required to collect 'major demographic data' from all participants involved in the study. This demographic data will be anonymised and is only collected so readers have a clear understanding of the collective demographics in relation to the collected data. I will need confirmation of your child's age and gender.

14. Please confirm your child's age.

Tick all that apply.

- 10
- 11
- 12
- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19
- Other

Mark only one oval.

- Male *Skip to question 17*
- Female *Skip to question 17*
- Non-binary *Skip to question 17*
- Other

16. Please type your child's gender identity in the text box below.

Availability

Please provide me with some days and times that your child may be available to complete this interview over the next six weeks. If you are unsure, feel free to write "unsure" and I will be in touch to arrange a date.

17. Please let me know your child's availability over the next four (approximately) weeks

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Google Forms

Appendix K - Autistic student study, student assent form

Creative Art-Based Pedagogies Information and Consent Form - Participant

Dear Participant, you are invited to take part in a (approximately) 1 hour interview. If you want to take part, Please ensure you read, watch or listen to the project information by following one (or all!) of the links below:

[PDF poster style](#)

[PDF plain text](#)

Audio

Video

This project is funded by the University of York's Department of Education's Small Grant.

If you still wish to proceed with taking part in this research once you have read, seen or heard the information about this project via one of the links above, please fill out the following consent form.

Please note, this consent form is for **participants** only, if you are a parent or carer of a participant, please fill out the parent / carer consent form by following this [link](#). Your child will only be able to partake once I have received consent from both them, and you.

* Indicates required question

1. I confirm that I have read, seen or heard and understood the information given to me and I understand what it means to be involved. *

Mark only one oval.

I confirm

I do not confirm

2. I understand that I can choose whether or not I participate and I can stop participating at any time up until I approve the final written version of our chat, without having to provide a reason, by emailing kayleigh.doyle@york.ac.uk *

Mark only one oval.

- I understand
 I do not understand

3. I understand that what I say will be made anonymous, and may be used in publications, presentations and online, or used in other analysis. *

Mark only one oval.

- I understand
 I do not understand

4. I consent to my anonymised data being kept for 5 years after which time it will be destroyed

Mark only one oval.

- I consent
 I do not consent

5. I confirm that I have read the information about GDPR *

Mark only one oval.

- I confirm
 I do not confirm

6. Two steps will be taken to make sure that only people who fit within the criteria of the study are signing up, and to make sure people only interview once.

1. If your interview is via Zoom, you will be asked to turn on your camera for a moment at the start of the interview. You don't have to keep your camera on, but we do need to check your identity right at the start.

2. You will be asked some verification questions right at the start of the interview too.

Please note that if the researcher feels that the participant and / or their parent / carer is falsely claiming to fall within the recruitment criteria, they can stop the interview at any time and, if this happens, you would not receive the £5* Amazon Voucher.

*One voucher per young person; no vouchers are available for parents of participants

Mark only one oval.

I understand

I do not understand

7. Bearing all of that in mind, I consent to taking part in the study as described in the information I read, watched or listened to. *

Mark only one oval.

I consent

I do not consent

8. What is your preferred method of contact prior to the interview? (multiple selection) *

Mark only one oval.

- Email *Skip to question 10*
- Phone call *Skip to question 9*
- Video call (video on) *Skip to question 10*
- Video call (video off) *Skip to question 10*

Untitled section

phone

9. If your preferred method of contact is via the phone, please provide me a phone number to contact you on

Skip to question 10

Untitled section

Email

10. Please provide me with an email address that it is best to contact you on. Your parent / carer will also receive all correspondence. *

11. Do you have any questions for me? I will aim to respond to all questions via the email address provided above as soon as possible.

12. What is your full legal name?

13. What is the full legal name of your parent / carer who is filling out a consent form? *

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Google Forms

Appendix L - Autistic student study, debrief letter



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Department of
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CABP

CREATIVE ART-BASED PEDAGOGY: CO-PRODUCING A MANIFESTO

THANK YOU!

Thank you for Participating!

I am so grateful for the time you have put into taking part in this research, it was great to meet you, too!

Please respond to this email and confirm if you are happy, or if there are any comments you would like to add to the attached transcript. If I have not heard back after one week, I will send an email reminder to you. If I have not heard back in two weeks, your transcript will be included as it is.

**WHAT
HAPPENS
NEXT?**

I will spend some time putting together all of the answers I got from you and others, and I will arrange them into a *manifesto*.

This manifesto will be a great starting point for future research in this area!!

Co-producers have the option to be the first to hear about the findings from this study - nearer the time, I will arrange an online call where we can talk through them.

If you are interested in attending, let me know in response to this email!

**HOW DO YOU
KEEP UP TO
DATE?**

If you would like to have your contact details kept on file:

- For involvement in any future research
- To hear about the findings of this study
- To be sent the manifesto once it is complete

Please let me know in response to this email.

Once again - thank you so much for your time!

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