TAKING OFF THE MASK: AUTISTIC YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES WITH SOCIAL SKILLS IN HIGH SCHOOL

by

Marisa Kofke

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

PREFACE

In the spring of 2016, a few months before I moved from Pennsylvania to Oregon, a scholar-friend alerted me to a small practitioner transition conference taking place in Oregon. At their suggestion, I submitted a proposal on social skills instruction. This was an opportunity for me to become acquainted with transition and special education services in my new state, as well as meet some new people. For the most part, the conference was a success; however one interaction in particular stayed with me over the years.

My presentation occurred in one of the final time-slots on the final day. To my astonishment I was met with a packed room of practitioners eager to engage about social skills curricula. Prior to the start of the session, I was chatting with one of the conference attendees. At the time, I was in the beginning stages of this dissertation study centered specifically on the autistic experience of girls and young women. When I shared my idea with this attendee he responded in a serious tone, "but girls don't have autism." Alas, the room was filling up and it was time to start the presentation. I was unable to do much more than to assure him, "of course girls have autism too."

As I have shared this story over the years in other conference presentations and informally with others, I am almost always greeted with knowing nods. This was an affirmation that mine was not a particularly novel experience. Another graduate student once shared with me their advocacy on this subject. When they were attending an international conference, a senior special education academic and scholar announced to their roundtable that girls do not have autism. Fortunately, my colleague

corrected that misconception, astonished that a senior academic would espouse such falsehood.

It has become clear that despite the proliferation of scientific funding and research poured into understanding autism, conventional wisdom continues to prevail on the topic of autism and gender. Misunderstandings on the experiences of autistic girls and women abound in the United States. I hope for practitioners, family members, and academics to come away from this study with more understandings of the gendered nature of autism through learning from and listening to Maia, Ninja, Ernie, and Tayson's experiences.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation study explores adolescent socialization experiences and understandings of autistic identity from the perspectives of four autistic young women. Stemming from a concerning disproportionate gender representation of autism, with males diagnosed at the rate of 1 in 39 and females at 1 in 151 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018), this study is, in part, a response to the autism research community's call for more research to support the needs of autistic girls and young women and increased understanding of their experiences (Shefcyk, 2015). Additionally, autistic women tend to be diagnosed later in life and may be misdiagnosed with other mental health illnesses due to masking and imitation of social skills (Tierney, Burns, & Kilby, 2016; Jamison & Schuttler, 2015).

Two research questions are asked in this study: 1. What are the perspectives of adolescent autistic students who identify as female, girl, or young woman on their experiences learning and using social skills in high school? and, 2. How does the ongoing work of learning social skills at school, through instruction and otherwise, contribute to students' perspectives on the development of an autistic/disability identity? This phenomenological dissertation study explores the school-based experiences of autistic adolescent young woman as they learn social skills and understand the nuances of learning social skills from their perspectives. The findings will yield valuable insights applicable to families and practitioners working with this under-researched population to improve transition experiences and outcomes.

At school, autistic teens are supported with myriad social skills interventions, ranging from focused intervention practices and comprehensive treatment models (Odom, Boyde, Hall, & Hume, 2010), to curriculum-based (Laugeson et al., 2014; Crooke & Winner, n.d.), and peer-inclusive interventions (Bottema-Beutel, Mullins, Harvey, Gustafson, & Carter, 2015; Diener et al., 2015; Hochman et al., 2015). Such school-based interventions have several implications regarding the development of autistic identity (Connor, 2013; Baines, 2012; Bagatell, 2007/2010; Zambo, 2010). The concept of autistic identity has been linked to the use of identity-first language (Sinclair, 1993), the understanding of the neurodiversity paradigm (Kapp, Gillespie-Lynch, Sherman, and Hutman, 2014; Ortega, 2009), the awareness of autistic communities (Bagatell, 2010; Sinclair, 2010), and autistic culture (Straus, 2010). These concepts rarely have been the focus of school-based studies involving autistic adolescents and deserve further scrutiny.

This study applies the frameworks of disability studies in education, feminist disability studies, and critical autism studies to the qualitative social skills experiences of autistic adolescent girls. Disability studies in education uncover facets of disability residing outside the scope of the individual and seek to better understand individual experiences from the sociocultural perspective (Connor et al., 2008). Feminist disability studies apply a gendered understanding of disability identity to research (Garland-Thompson, 2011). Critical autism studies promote and values autistic scholarship, as well as unearthing social power dynamics experienced by autistic people.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative method which unearths the meaning of an experience from the participant perspective (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2008) is applied to this study. IPA is well-suited to understanding experiences related to transitions and identity, two salient components of the research questions about autistic adolescent girls' experiences with social skills programming at school.

The findings revealed that the students placed much value on fostering authentic friendships with other students in their schools. The students in this study desired relationships where they felt respected and understood by peers and adults alike. Their perceptions of their teachers and classes led to understandings of the need for school personnel to develop positive relationships with autistic students. The young women in this study did not experience much intersection between being autistic and their gender as a female. The students were not exposed to autistic mentors or autistic peers who were also female either in their school or their community. Implications related to the well-being of autistic students going through transition, instruction on markers of autistic culture and neurodiversity, and the patriarchal constructs that can be reinforced in majority male gendered classroom spaces are expanded upon.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 definition for autism refers to significant challenges related to communication and social interactions. In relationship to this deficit-based interpretation of autism, a domino effect has occurred throughout schools in the United States. Often, in understanding autism as a deficit in communication and social interactions, social skills instruction is a component included in an autistic student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) at school. Outcome data reveals that after transitioning out of high school, autistic young adults have more difficulty obtaining and sustaining employment, postsecondary schooling, independent living arrangements, and friendships than peers with other disabilities (Roux, Shattuck, Rast, Rava, & Anderson, 2015). Further exploration of the school-based social skills instruction experiences of autistic youth may serve to better interpret these outcomes. Compounding the need for understanding social skills instruction experiences, there are noted observations of gendered differences in how autistic adolescents socialize and use social skills (Jamison & Schuttler, 2015). In particular, when singling out the social experiences of autistic adolescent girls there is much to unearth regarding the intersection of their social and transition experiences.

1.1 Transition and Social Experiences of Autistic Adolescent Girls

In general, girls with disabilities have concerning and disparate outcomes after high school. Employed women with disabilities earn less money than male counterparts (Doren, Gau, & Lindstrom, 2010). Adolescent girls feel stigmatized by their disability – partly due to placement in special education classes – and their overall transition experiences stand apart as being less successful (Hogansen, Powers, Geenen, Gil-Kashiwabara & Powers, 2008). Girls from diverse backgrounds also have less opportunity to develop self-determination skills (Trainor, 2007). With the goal of decreasing these risk factors, interventions have been developed for adolescent girls with disabilities to mitigate these disparate outcomes (e.g. Paths 2 the Future Curriculum, Lindstrom, Doren, Post, & Lombardi, 2013).

The social experiences of autistic adolescent girls, and their perspectives of such experiences, has only recently become an area of academic scrutiny. Cridland, Jones, Magee, and Caputi (2013) conducted interviews with autistic adolescent girls and their mothers. Their findings revealed how adolescent girls engage in conversation that may be considered inappropriate for the setting as well as ongoing issues with hygiene. The authors also note that several of the girls were nonconforming to traditional feminine standards. Another qualitative study about social experiences in school reveals autistic adolescent girls' desire for friendships. However, keeping up with gendered social expectations, understanding social cues, and environmental sensory barriers prevented successful long-term relationships. Through memory and repetition of social cues, the female participants relayed how they consciously developed a sense of empathy, which is a social skill that had been considered elusive for autistic individuals (Tierney, Burns, & Kilby, 2016). Additionally, Jamison and Schuttler (2015) determine adolescent autistic girls perceive themselves as having

increased social-emotional vulnerabilities when compared to their non-autistic peers, including lower social competence, self-worth, and quality of life. These studies provide important information about generalized socialization for adolescent autistic girls; however, there are few sources which discuss the school-based experiences, needs, or observations from adolescent girls and young women

1.2 Autistic Women and Girls as a Distinct Concern

Autism has been the topic of much academic scrutiny over the past 30 years. Theories about autism's etiology and the potential for corresponding cures have engaged the psychological, medical, and neuroscience communities. The current prevalence of autism in the general population is approximately 1 out of every 59 children (Baio et al., 2018), with 1 in 39 being male and 1 in 151 being female (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Disproportionate aggregations of individuals diagnosed with autism can be found according to gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Most individuals diagnosed with autism are white, male, and from middle- to upper-class socioeconomic status backgrounds (CDC, 2018).

There is evidence of a concerning disproportionate representation of the number of girls and women who should be diagnosed with autism. Autistic women tend to be diagnosed later in life and are often misdiagnosed with other mental health illnesses before settling on an autism diagnosis (Bargiela, Steward, & Mandy, 2016). Autistic girls also often have secondary mental health issues as a result of attempting to mask autistic behavior and imitating social cues (Tierney, Burns, & Kilby, 2016, Jamison & Schuttler, 2015). Currently, in the psychological field, there are proposed research efforts aiming to identify the potential for a Broader Autism Phenotype (BAP) as well as gender-based diagnostic testing (Kirkovski, Enticott, & Fitzgerald,

2013). The research community has called for further research supporting the needs of autistic girls and women and also to increase understanding of their experiences (Shefcyk, 2015).

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this dissertation is multifaceted. I completed the study from a feminist sociocultural perspective to observe, analyze, and understand the lived experiences of autistic adolescent female students in high school as they learn and use social skills. Due to the increased social and emotional vulnerability inherent with this population, much still needs to be learned of their experiences. This study will also explore connections between the students' perspectives on their school-based experiences and the development of autistic identity while undergoing social skills instruction. This exploration of the nuances of learning social skills from their own perspectives as well as those of family members and teachers will yield valuable insights that families, practitioners, and educators can apply as they provide services and support to young women with autism.

1.3.1 Framework

I conceptualize socialization and learning social skills as a holistic and relational process with connections to the development of a gendered identity. Using three sociocultural frameworks (Disability Studies in Education, Feminist Disability Studies, Critical Autism Studies) I seek to dismantle the dominance of the male experience and the sociocultural assumptions that autism is primarily a male disability (Bargiela, Steward, & Mandy, 2016). As girls mature through adolescence, their social world takes on an emotional dimension that is often enigmatic to autistic adolescent

girls (Tierney, Burns, & Kilby, 2016). Little is known about the difference in autistic socialization between genders. This study seeks in part to garner a better understanding of the differences in socialization processes by gender through qualitative research exploring student perspectives of the experience of learning social skills and then determining whether connections exist to the development of identity and school culture. Put differently, the use of these sociocultural frameworks is guided by the observations of the gendered differences in socialization and relationships at school, as well as understanding the role of autism in these components.

1.3.2 Research Questions

The following research questions are proposed for this study:

1. What are the perspectives of adolescent autistic students who identify as female, girl, or young woman on their experiences learning and using social skills in high school?
    i. How do these students interpret and make use of the social skills instruction they receive?
    ii. What other school-based experiences contribute to the students' perspectives on learning and using social skills?
2. How does the ongoing work of learning social skills at school, via instruction or otherwise, contribute to the students' perspectives on the development of an autistic/disability identity?

1.4 Organization of the Dissertation

In this dissertation Chapter 2 provides a brief description of the theoretical frameworks guiding the study as well as a summary of the research literature on social skills instruction and autistic identity that inform the study's focus. Chapter 3 explains the rationale for adopting a phenomenological approach and details the study's methods. One aspect of this method that will be discussed in detail is my researcher

positioning which is embedded into the phenomenological method and is incorporated as a feature of this research process. Chapter 4 reviews the themes that were uncovered from the interviews with the student participants. Separate case studies compiled for each the four students who participated in this study are analyzed. Chapter 5 expands on the findings from the previous chapter with discussion and implication of areas for future study.

1.5 Notes on Language

In exploring the experiences of autistic individuals, it is important to continue to listen to voices that have already made observations about the autistic experience and the enmeshed role of language. Throughout this dissertation proposal I diverge from the APA style recommendation to use person first language ("student with autism") and make use of identity-first language ("autistic student") when referring to autistic individuals. Identity-first language considers autism as an inherent, positive characteristic of one's personhood which cannot be separated from an individual (Sinclair, 2013). I also use identity-first language in recognition and support of the neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2013). I refer to individuals who are "neurodivergent" and "neurotypical." At the suggestion of Nick Walker (2013) neurodivergent is a phrase used to describe individuals who experience neurodivergence in the form of autism, Attention Deficit Disorder, depression, and anxiety, among other neurodivergent labels. The term neurotypical refers to individuals who are not neurodivergent.

At times, when referring to students with disabilities I continue with person-first language ("students with disabilities") as this is a reference to multiple types of disabilities rather than autism only and each disability community has their own

preferences for how to engage with language of their disability. In this instance the use of APA style suffices as an umbrella term describing all disabilities together.

Additionally, I use the gender terms “girl,” “woman,” “young women,” “female,” “boy,” “man,” “young man,” and “male” interchangeably when discussing or identifying an individual’s gender throughout this dissertation. I want to recognize that gender is a sociocultural construction that resides on a spectrum with one’s gender identification laying beyond, and/or within, the gender binary of female/male, girl/boy, or woman/man. The young women in this study all initially identified their gender to me using the words “female,” “girl,” and/or “woman.” I continue here applying the language for their gender that we used together.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

I begin this chapter with a literature review on the sociocultural theoretical frameworks of disability studies in education, feminist disability studies, and critical autism studies. Each of these frameworks was selected to support different aspects of this study. Disability studies in education attends to the school-based component, feminist disability studies focus on the issues with gender and autism, critical autism studies serve to promote the voices of autistic people. These frameworks are activist in nature, with the intention of unearthing issues of power within relationships in schools, as well as the patriarchal structures that support oppression of autistic girls and women in educational settings. I continue this chapter with an overview of the literature on social skills development and instruction for adolescents with disabilities. Conclusions regarding connections to autistic identity and implications for the study of autistic girls' experiences learning social skills in schools are also discussed.

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

2.1.1 Disability Studies in Education

Disability studies in education (DSE) is the educational arm of the broader discipline of disability studies (DS). DS endorses the notion of viewing disability conceptually with disability models (e.g. social, charity, rehabilitation, identity). A social model of disability is the most notable one used in DS communities through multidisciplinary inquiry, education, and practice to promote a critical perspective and

discourse on disability (Danforth, 2014; Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012). With a history in the U.S. stemming from the disability rights movement, this perspective takes the sociocultural viewpoint that disability is a societal construct (Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012; Oliver, 1996). A social model of disability applies social constructivist theory to determine whether and how disability develops through the interaction of personal characteristics and sociocultural barriers which can result in decreased outcomes for people with disabilities. The model further recognizes ableism, or discriminatory acts towards people with disabilities that are a routine part of life in the United States for those with disabling conditions, and how ableist constructs assists in creating of disability through lack of accessible accommodations (Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2014; Dewsbury et al., 2004).

DS affirms the sociopolitical effects of having a disability, and the corresponding ableist effects of residing within a capitalist economy that successfully creates disabling conditions for people with disabilities (Oliver, 1996). Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) state the conceptual underpinnings of scholars undertaking the study of disability must be: social, foundational, interdisciplinary, participatory, and values-based. These concepts have been applied to the examination of disability in schools within the field of DSE.

Historically, the work and study of students with disabilities has occurred within the discipline of special education. Special education mandates stem from the disability rights movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. In 1973, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was made into law and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as it is currently known, passed in 1975. These federal policies were developed to promote equity in education for students with disabilities. However, such

laws are grounded in a medical model of disability where disability is construed as a deficit and situated as a problem within the child that must have a focused team of professionals assigned to the student (Beratan, 2006). Thus, DSE is a framework useful for uncovering facets of disability in special education settings that reside outside the scope of the individual and understands individual experiences from a sociocultural perspective, rather than the traditional interventionist special education approach.

Aligning with this study's aims, scholarship about girls and young women with disabilities from a DSE perspective has been undertaken. Notably, Annamma's (2014) research about the school-to-prison pipeline involved adolescent girls with disabilities who were incarcerated in the juvenile justice system. Connor and Ferri (2009) explored the retrospective school experiences of girls of color with learning disabilities. These studies discussed the intersectional issues related to being a girl or young woman and having a disability from a critical DSE lens which incorporated foundational feminist perspectives of exploring the experiences of female adolescents with disabilities.

2.1.2 Feminist Disability Studies

Feminist theory posits feminist scholarship as unearthing the exploitative and discriminatory nature of the female experience within patriarchal society (hooks, 1984). bell hooks (1984) discusses the need to explore the experiences of those who live within female margins. A feminist disability studies (FDS) framework recognizes the double discrimination women and girls experience as being girls and women in a patriarchal society and disabled in an ableist society (Wendell, 1989). Rosemarie

Garland-Thompson (2011) provides the following description on feminist disability theory:

> Feminist disability theory addresses such broad feminist concerns as the unity of the category *woman,* the status of the lived body, the politics of appearance, the medicalization of the body, the privilege of normalcy, multiculturalism, sexuality, the social construction of identity, and the commitment to integration. (p. 16)

Much of this study's purposes align with Garland-Thompson's description. In particular, I aim to better understand the social construction of identity and its application to autistic adolescent girls.

The few studies examining autistic adolescents reveal that there are significant differences in how autism is understood from male and female perspectives. Research points to autistic girls demonstrating behavior outside the autistic phenotype, including the ability to successfully mimic the social behavior of peers and effectively hiding nonconforming "autistic" traits such as repetitive behaviors, insistence on sameness, etc. (Kirkovski, Enticott, & Fitzgerald, 2013). This has been to the detriment of autistic girls as they are often misdiagnosed until late adolescence or adulthood and suffer from internalizing symptoms such as anxiety or anorexia (Tierney, Burns, & Kilby, 2016; Mandy & Tchanturia, 2015). The feminist stance in this study is reflected in its focus on autistic girls and young women and the need to examine, explore, and understand their unique perspectives and experiences.

In general, a disproportionally smaller number of girls are identified for special education services as compared to their male counterparts (Rousso, 2001). This is troubling when considering the further issues at stake for autistic girls and women. Autism has historically been viewed through a patriarchal male lens. The rhetoric surrounding autism is both stigmatizing (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008) and skewed

toward a male perspective (Jack, 2011). Concerns of the research community include the lack of diagnostic testing developed exclusively for autistic girls and young women as well as the assumption that girls and women become more male as a result of an autism diagnosis (Shefcyk, 2015). Shefcyk (2015) discusses the growing concerns about the gendered division of autism:

> To be a female with an ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] is to be twice excluded: once from the neurotypical female population, and once again from the ASD community. The myth of ASD as a male-centric phenomenon will only continue unless further work is done to raise greater awareness of the unique (and overlapping) traits and needs of girls and women with ASD. It is therefore, imperative that more research and practice is developed to enhance the outcomes for this population. (p. 132)

Socioculturally, autism has been understood primarily as a male disability. According to Bargiela, Steward, and Mandy (2016) the diagnostic testing used in determining a diagnosis of autism is based on male children's behaviors, concluding that the social aspects of autism would appear the same regardless of gender. Meanwhile, male and female experiences of socialization are mired in gendered expectations from a very young age (Bargiela, Steward, & Mandy, 2016). These gendered issues related to autism require further exploration from a feminist lens.

In seeking to better understand the autistic experience of girls and women I hope to continue the work of promoting anti-discriminatory practices benefitting autistic girls and women and to clarify how gendered stereotypes have led to false assumptions about girls and women with an autism label.

2.1.3 Critical Autism Studies

Critical autism studies (CAS) is the third framework applied to this study in order to center the focus of this research on autistic experiences from the autistic

perspectives of the study's participants. This interdisciplinary framework emphasizes unique autistic experiences and reframes the focus of autism from a deficit perspective to understanding autism as another natural aspect of human diversity. The term 'critical autism studies' recently emerged in 2010 after discussion of topics salient to this framework (Orsini & Davidson, 2013). Subsequent scholarly works written by both autistic and non-autistic people detailing CAS has followed. Notably, several interdisciplinary works completed with a CAS perspective in mind, are authored by autistic academics (Yeargeau, 2018) and discuss issues salient to autistic people (McGuire, 2016, Jack, 2014).

Additionally, this framework focuses on how research completed with autistic individuals should be reconceptualized. O'Dell, Rosqvist, Ortega, Brownlow and Orsini (2016) provide the following outline of three main elements encompassing CAS:

1. Careful attention to how power relations shape the field of autism
2. Concern to advance new, enabling narratives of autism that challenge the predominant (deficit-focused and degrading) constructions that influence public opinion, policy and popular culture; and
3. Commitment to develop new analytical frameworks using inclusive and non-reductive methodological and theoretical approaches to study the nature and culture of autism. The interdisciplinary (particularly social sciences and humanities) research required demands sensitivity to the kaleidoscopic complexity of this highly individualised, relational (dis)order. (Davidson and Orsini, 2013, 12; original emphasis) (pp. 167-168).

More recently, Woods, Milton, Arnold, and Graby (2018), citing Waltz (2014), elucidated upon the "critical" component of CAS and agreed upon an additional inclusive definition:

> The ‘criticality’ comes from investigating power dynamics that operate in Discourses around autism, questioning deficit-based definitions of autism, and being willing to consider the ways in which biology and culture intersect to produce ‘disability’. (Waltz 2014, 1337). (p. 978)

Expanding on this ‘critical’ element, relationships with autistic people are historically steeped in the power constructs that positioned being “normal” as not only desirable, but the goal of much research completed on autistic people (McGuire, 2016; Jack, 2014) This phenomenon can be observed in much of the intervention-based social skills research, which I discuss in the next section of this chapter. These components have, in part, led to society’s deficit-centric zeitgeist of autism. CAS aims to upend this status quo of autism research.

Another component of CAS expanded upon by Woods et. al (2018) seeks to understand the breadth of what encompasses the definition of autism. The pathologized notions of autism, which make up the dominant discourses and definition of autism are challenged. When autism is discussed from this critical perspective the voices and experiences of autistic people are given value and placed at the center (O’Dell et. al, 2016). In light of the prevailing deficit-based definitions of autism the words of the autistic students who participated in this study will describe what autism is to them. This will be expanded upon and discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

CAS also acknowledges the need to understand the history of autism, and how it came to be a white, male, disability label. Autism has historically been situated within the psychological and medical disciplines, with the first cases of autism discovered in children by two male psychologists in the 1940’s: Dr. Leo Kanner in the United States, and Dr. Hans Asperger in Austria. Congruent with conceptualizations of disability at the time, children (mostly male) were diagnosed according to

psychological criteria that have traditionally been housed within a medicalized model of disability (Silberman, 2015).

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) has been, and continues to be, used by psychologists and psychiatrists to provide disability labels to individuals demonstrating diagnostic criteria outlined within. Autism was first used as a descriptor within *Schizophrenic reaction, childhood type* in the DSM-I, and again as *Schizophrenia, childhood type* in the DSM-II. Then specific criteria were delineated specifically for autism as its own disorder in the DSM-III in 1980 under *Infantile Autism. Autistic Disorder* was then used in the DSM IV in 1994 and IV TR in 2000 (Grinker, 2007), with the DSM-5 settling on *Autism Spectrum Disorder* (ASD) (APA, 2013) as the newest iteration. In the DSM-5 ASD is categorized as a disorder marked by the medicalized terms of "abnormal social behavior", along with describing a variety of "impairments" (see appendix for DSM-5 criteria of ASD).

This history of diagnostic criteria and conceptualization of autism in mainstream culture is re-considered within a CAS framework. With each diagnostic change, autism becomes the subject of discussion in the cultural consciousness with connections to the increasing rates of autism in the United States. It is often portrayed negatively (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008), which can have long lasting effects on how autism is discussed in United States culture. For example, Jack (2014) discusses the debunked "refrigerator mother" phenomenon initiated by falsely credentialed psychologist Bruno Bettelheim. This phenomenon prevailed in the 1950's and 1960's and has created stigmatizing long-lasting effects on how parents, particularly mothers, are viewed when a child is provided with an autism diagnostic label. Additionally, Melanie Yeargeau, an autistic scholar (2018), critiques well-known behavioral and

bio-medical researchers, O. Ivar Lovaas, and Simon Baron-Cohen, for their behavioral and medicalized notions of autism, which were swept up into the mainstream culture to view autism from their perspective. These concepts, which espouses Applied Behavior Analysis (Lovaas) and Theory of Mind (Baron-Cohen) have remained largely unchallenged by the scientific community, however according to Yeargeau, autistic people routinely challenge these notions developed by non-autistic professionals. Yet, their autistic assertions largely remain undocumented and invisible to the dominant culture.

The notion of neurodiversity resonates with autistic people and promotes a greater understanding of a non-deficit-based conceptualization of autism (Kapp, Gillespie-Lynch, Sherman, & Hutman, 2013). Autistic scholar Nick Walker (2014), succinctly defines *neurodiversity* as, "the diversity of human brains and minds – the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species." Keeping this definition at the forefront, I want to note a contradiction between CAS and DS frameworks. CAS illuminates the tensions between autistic people identifying as part of a neurodiverse population while the DS frameworks focus on the social model's external barriers that lead to disabling conditions (Woods et. al, 2018). Neurodiversity relates to one's neurological differences rather than the societal barriers that create disabling conditions. As such, neurodiversity serves as a foundation for autistic people to embody an identity-based disability model (Brueggemann, 2014) rather than a disability studies-centric social model. What results is autism acknowledged as a key component to one's identity beyond the perspective that autism is a disability or disabling condition.

The facets of a CAS perspective that are not accounted for by DSE or FDS reside in understanding how American culture addresses the concept of autism and autistic people, as well as the dynamics of power in these autism (or autistic) conversations. In particular, I am interested in the role a school's culture has in these dialogues about autism (or autistic people) from the perspectives of autistic female students. While DSE is sufficient to support the unearthing of power dynamics at school, as has been discussed by Connor (2013) who used DSE to interrogate these types of sociocultural facets of Asperger's Syndrome, I also want to consider how autism itself is socioculturally situated within the discourses related to power and the historical denigration of autistic perspectives (Yeargeau, 2018; Jack, 2014). CAS is successful in standing apart from the DSE and FDS frameworks through promoting the unique autistic perspective and embedding it into the research project and researcher's position on the study.

2.1.4 When the Researcher is Not Autistic

Gillespie-Lynch, Kapp, Brooks, Pickens, and Schwartzman (2017) discuss how autistic people should be considered the experts on research about autism and autistic people. Due to several constraints, I was unable to develop this dissertation study using a participatory model that partners with autistic people from start to finish. However, noting this, as I move forward with this outsider status as a non-autistic researcher, by applying CAS as a framework it is my hope that the purposeful citation of autistic scholars, activists, and their allies, in addition to the autistic participants, are represented throughout this dissertation.

Additionally, most special education teachers who work with autistic students are white, upper to middle class, female, and not autistic. Not surprisingly, as a former

special educator who taught autistic students, my background matches this description (See chapter 3 for a more thorough description of my researcher positionality). This study is written with my experiences in mind. I intend for the information gained from this research to be used toward supporting teachers in better understanding – and hopefully troubling – their pedagogical practices within the confines of the special education system. This is accomplished through learning about autistic voices throughout this study and incorporating their work into this project. Put another way, research completed within other politically-situated identity-based frameworks (e.g. Critical Race Theory, Feminist Theory) would require highlighting the voices of those identifying with those theories. As such, centering autistic voices is a key focus here and represented throughout this work. This is of particular importance due to my outsider position on understanding the autistic experience.

2.1.5 Application of Critical Autism/Feminist/Disability Studies in Education

This study explores the intersection of lived experiences of autistic young women within the school setting as they learn and use social skills. Throughout this dissertation I use these three critical frameworks to examine these experiences, as schools have the potential to be a site for reinforcing traditional gender roles (Raftery & Valiulis, 2008) especially for girls with disability labels (Lindstrom, Harwick, Poppen & Doren, 2012). Further, adoption of this multiple framework approach provides a richer perspective on experiences of girls and women and autistic identity development within the school setting.

2.2 Positioning Social Skills Instruction

In this section I briefly contrast the social development of autistic and non-autistic adolescent girls as framed by current developmental research. I then describe how social skills are usually taught to students in schools, specifically research involving autistic youth. The use of this developmental approach is purposeful, in order to provide an overview of how the current research in the field has been conceptualized. Then I move on to openings where social skills research could promote more sociocultural perspectives beyond the dominant developmental view. I conclude with an alternative sociocultural perspective on social development for autistic students and make connections to the both the neurodiversity paradigm and the concept of autistic identity.

2.2.1 Social Development and Adolescent Girls

The field of human development stems from several theoretical locations, with views on social development enveloped within each theory. Ranging from behavioral (Skinner), to cognitive (Piaget), to psychoanalytic (Freud, then Erickson), to sociocultural (Vygotsky), to a developmental systems approach (Bronfenbrenner) (Schickedanz, Schickedanz, Forsyth, and Forsyth, 2001), each theory lends its own contribution to the overall understanding of human development. Extant research on the social development of autistic girls derives from these foundations and often contrasts their development with that of non-autistic peers.

2.2.2 Non-Autistic Adolescent Girls

Much of the observed social development in non-autistic adolescent girls revolves around peer group acceptance and increased emotional needs. In early adolescence peer groups start out as homogenous groupings of mostly girls, then

throughout adolescence become more heterogeneous into a mixture of genders (APA, 2002). Girls tend to conform to the social needs dictated by their peer group. Crowds and cliques are formed based on similar interests. Adolescence is a time for identity development, and such groupings offer the opportunity to explore identities based on interests (e.g. books, music, tech). Throughout adolescence the reliance on conforming to group expectations tends to decrease while selectivity when determining friendships tends to increase. Relational aggression (bullying) is prevalent with adolescent girls in particular, with minor social cues (e.g. eye rolling, giggling, gestures) used to indicate in-group relationships and demonstrate power over groups and individuals. Dating often starts within a group first, which then branches into smaller groups. For girls, positive self-esteem is correlated with dating throughout adolescence (Schickedanz et al., 2001). Adolescents who do not participate in group activities due to ostracization may have increased at-risk behaviors, such as involvement with drugs, alcohol, and decreased academic performance (APA, 2002).

2.2.3 Autistic Adolescent Girls

Many of the social theories related to autism revolve around the medicalized neurobiological mechanisms (e.g. Theory of Mind, Central Coherence, Executive Functioning) responsible for socialization and the resulting corresponding observable social behaviors (Shea & Mesibov, 2005). According to these theories, autistic girls may not desire acceptance in large peer groups, instead showing a high preference for one or two close friends, if any. There may be difficulty understanding the nuances involved with relational aggression, which often results in autistic girls being the unsuspecting targets of bullying. The increasingly emotional nature of socialization can lead to misunderstandings or confusion about social cues as the social rules and

basis of friendships change during adolescence. Along with biological changes with puberty, it is common for autistic girls to require extra support with hygiene routines, have increased behavioral meltdowns due to new sensory issues, and engage in inappropriate sexual behavior, or be targets of sexual abuse. While not directly related to socialization, concerns in these areas can result in ostracization from peer groups (Nichols, Moravcik, & Tetenbaum, 2009; Shea & Mesibov, 2005). These concerns regarding autistic social development often lead to social skills interventions and instruction in schools.

2.2.4 Social Skills Instruction

Guided by the regulations outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), secondary school professionals develop targeted goals within an Individual Educational Program (IEP) for students receiving special education services (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2013). The IEP goals for autistic students often include the attainment of social skills. Practitioners complete several types of assessments to determine goals for the IEP, including observing social skills while collecting data during a functional behavior assessment and completion of validated assessment measures such as the *Social Skills Rating Scale* (Luisilli et al., 2005). From this perspective, social skills interventions are conceptually grounded within a medical model of disability where autism is viewed as a disabling condition with deficits that require remediation. As such, autistic students are considered to have "social deficits" and social skills interventions are planned to address them from this deficit model (e.g. Laugeson et al., 2014).

2.2.4.1 Curriculum

Practitioners choose from myriad social skills curricula that offer social skills interventions within a package of activities for use in a classroom setting. There are scarce secondary level curricular resources considered to be evidence-based (Laugeson, et al., 2014). The UCLA PEERS intervention is an evidence-based curriculum program developed for autistic students to take as a semester-long course (Laugeson, et al., 2014). Another curricular framework is Social Thinking, which seeks to change neurobiological deficits related to autism such as executive functioning, central coherence, and Theory of Mind (Crooke & Winner, n.d.). This approach utilizes both curricular packages and stand-alone activities to supplement existing social skills goals, which has great appeal to practitioners (Richman, 2015). The Social Thinking framework has not undergone enough empirical study to be determined as an evidence-based practice and has been equated with pseudoscience (Leaf et al., 2016). However, the curriculum appears to incorporate some specific practices that have a supported evidence-base, including video modeling, visual support, scripting, and social skills training.

2.2.4.2 Social Skills Instruction with Peers

Through interpersonal relationships, autistic youth learn about friendship and other areas of intimacy, such as how to appropriately embark on romantic relationships (Stokes, Newton, & Kaur, 2007). The self-concept and esteem of autistic students may increase when given opportunities to foster relationships with peers, which then corresponds to decreases in loneliness (Bauminger, Shulman, & Agam, 2004). Research points to the benefits of incorporating peers into social skills interventions in schools in order to facilitate authentic skill development as well as

offer students opportunities to work with and learn about diverse individuals. Recent research indicates that autistic youth prefer to learn social skills with their peers as opposed to direct instruction by a teacher (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2015). Also, peers and autistic youth enjoy working together toward the goal of social skills development (Bottema-Beutel, et al., 2015; Hochman et al., 2015). Authentic friendships can be fostered when autistic youth and peers have the opportunity to participate in joint activities focusing on areas of strength, (Diener et al., 2015).

2.2.4.3 Social Skills Interventions with Families

Families would like more opportunities for their autistic child to practice social skills outside of the school setting, with increasing prioritization on the quality of social interactions as their children age (Brewin, Renwick, & Schormans, 2008). This concern reflects research determining some issues with the generalization of social skills after a treatment protocol has been administered (Rao, Beidel, & Murray, 2008). Parents feel that it is important to work on social interactions, although their autistic children may feel otherwise and decide against working on their social skills (McMahon & Solomon, 2015). Lack of youth motivation toward learning social skills and increasing social engagements may provide some explanation regarding issues with the generalization of social skills to alternative contexts

Both students and families feel schools could guide them better through the transition process (Hetherington, et al., 2010). Families desire better home-school collaborations in order to be educated about community-based organizations and/or support that would be beneficial to their child (Brewin, Renwick, & Schormans, 2008). This disconnect between schools and families results in parents advocating for their children with disabilities and uncertainty about the best path for transition

(Hetherington, et al., 2010). These perceptions of school-based services could be of assistance in collaborations with families.

2.2.4.4 Social Skills with the School-Wide Community

School Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (SWPBIS) is a school-based mechanism that is often applied toward changing overall school culture toward one that is more accepting of diverse student populations, including students with disabilities. According to Ross, Romer, and Horner (2012) this framework works to support both the student body as well as school faculty and staff with the goal of increased understanding of diverse individuals through development of a positive school culture. Through administrative, faculty, and staff "buy in" of inclusive practices, the school culture becomes one of accepting differences rather than defining individuals by their deficits (Ross et al., 2012). In such an environment, students can work toward self-determination and acceptance of their disability within a supportive context (Bohanon, Fenning, Eber, & Flannery, 2007).

Along with SWPBIS, schools can further achieve a school-based community of acceptance through incorporating myriad extracurricular clubs. Many autistic individuals have targeted special interests (e.g. anime, chess, history, geography, weather). By providing access to school-based affinity groups to explore their interests, schools can promote social skills development with peers who have similar interests in a supportive environment (Fein, 2015). Clubs and extracurricular activities offered by schools can play a role in promoting a community of acceptance.

2.3 Other Perspectives of Social Development and Social Skills

A great deal of social skills research aims to develop instruction and interventions intended to support autistic students in a variety of social situations. An interventionist perspective of social skills instruction seeks to understand *how* autistic students learn social skills. Other non-interventionist facets of social skills scholarship are interested in *what* is learned through social skills instruction from a sociocultural orientation. Understanding the sociocultural perspective of social development can be instructive in elucidating the rationale for social skills interventions. Woodhead, Faulkner, and Littleton (1999) provide a critique of traditional psychological-developmental models of social development and assert that children and teens are actively negotiating their own social development as they engage socially throughout childhood. In their critique of the role of culture in social development models they state:

> The social constructions adults impose on 'problematic' and antisocial behavior and attitudes may be very different from the meanings constructed by the children and young people. It is also the case that what is deemed 'problematic' behaviour according to one set of socio-cultural criteria may well be seen as positive and adaptive according to another. (p.4)

I apply this critique to autistic social development. Autistic adolescents undergoing social skills instruction often complete it due to others' views about the 'problematic' nature of their socialization processes. Also, the phenomenon of awareness of social development as noted above by Woodhead et al. (1999) has been observed in autistic adolescent girls. In particular, being aware that their behavior is viewed as 'problematic' may lead to attempts to consciously adapt to social surroundings in order to decrease stigmatizing autistic behaviors (Tierney, Burns, & Kilby, 2016). This

can result in misdiagnosis or diagnosis with autism later in life due to their ability to mask such 'problematic' behaviors.

Along with this critique of social development, it is useful to explore other perspectives on social skills instruction. Socialization is an intersectional skill which impacts the development of identity and community. I continue below with a brief examination of the connections among school-based disability identity, autistic identity and community, and social development.

2.3.1 Disability Identity in Schools

Social skills instruction has implications for the identity development of participating autistic students. Nakkula (2008) explains adolescent identity as:

> …the lived experience of an ongoing process-the process of integrating successes, failures, routines, habits, rituals, novelties, thrills, threats, violations, gratifications, and frustrations into a coherent and evolving interpretation of who we are. Identity is the embodiment of self-understanding. We are who we understand ourselves to be, as that understanding is shaped and lived out in everyday experience. (p. 2)

Adolescent identity development is dependent on the culture(s) in which adolescents are living, their schooling environment, and their own individual perceptions of self (Sandowski, 2008). These areas should not be siloed as discrete sites for identity development as it is a holistic process. It is useful to take a social-ecological approach to understand the several contextual factors which lead to identity (Beyers & Cok, 2008; Sandowski, 2008). This approach understands the role of the intersection between the interactions of individuals and environments in a student's life.

Schools are one site of identity development. Social relationships tend to flourish in schools. Relationships with teachers and peers assist with the trajectory of an adolescent's identity development (Harrell-Levy & Kerpelman, 2010). Once

authentic social networks are established, they contribute to positive identity development for students with disabilities (Zambo, 2010). The classroom itself has potential for fostering a feeling of belonging within a group which may serve to support the development of identity (Wenger, 1998).

Wehmeyer (2008) touches on several aspects of identity development for students with disabilities and the role schools play in this development. The stigmatizing effects of disability can negatively affect identity development. There may be negative interactions with peers, or teachers may have low expectations for such students. However, various interventions can be applied in schools to promote positive disability identity development. Focusing on teaching students self-determination skills that allow for agency in planning their life goals tends to increase positive perceptions of their disability. Interventions such as increasing expectations, incorporating learning communities that value student choice, and utilizing connections with families can contribute to a student's overall concept of self-determination (Wehmeyer, 2008).

2.3.2 Autistic Identity

When situating identity within the context of a community of learners at school, there are several implications for the development of autistic identity and community. Scholarly works discussing secondary schooling experiences and related connections to identity development (Jarrett, 2014; Poon, et al., 2014) were completed in countries outside the United States. Few studies about autistic identity in high school have been conducted in the United States (e.g. Connor, 2013; Baines, 2012) or they include a retroactive account of the high school experience (e.g. Alverson, Lindstrom, and Hirano, 2015; Bagatell, 2007). When considering how identity is

constructed specifically within the United States, this occurs in part as socially constructed and culturally situated within a student's learning environment (Werner, 1998). For autistic students, identity may be constructed differently depending on a country's climate, resources, and support available for students with disabilities.

If identity can be formed within a community of learners, it appears that the autistic community offers such a venue for this to occur. When students are not provided with opportunities to learn about autistic history or neurodiversity, a positive autistic identity may not come to fruition (Connor, 2013; Baines, 2012; Bagatell, 2007,2010). Meanwhile, students who positively identify with autism may have increased postsecondary outcomes (Alverson et al., 2015).

Additionally, identifying with one's disability can provide individuals with a positive framework in which to understand disability experiences. Brueggemann (2014) puts forth an identity model of disability which promotes membership in a disability community as a type of minority status, as opposed to a social model which situates disability politically. Identifying with one's disability can lead to positive perception of disability and potential for establishment within a disability community. The use of identity first language, the understanding of neurodiversity, and the role of autistic communities all play a part in autistic identity development.

2.3.3 Person-First and Identity-First Language

The language used to describe disability can serve as an important aspect of disability identity. Both person-first and identity-first language have been applied as a marker of how an individual views their disability identity (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012). Person-first language refers to separation from the individual and the disability (e.g. Sam, who has autism). Identity-first language refers to equating the individual with the

disability (e.g. Sam is autistic). Proponents of the former are often seeking out an identity that includes more than their disability – their disability does not define their personhood. Individuals in support of identity-first language equate disability with any other minority status and view disability as a point of pride. Using similar syntax from how one would state their ethnicity (the Latinx woman), gender (the female teacher), or religion (the Jewish man), they determine that disability should be similarly included as an identifier (the autistic student).

Autistic self-advocates and activists are some of the most vocal in their advocacy of the use of identity-first language. Jim Sinclair, an autistic academic and self-advocate, is credited with the first comment describing the need to identify with autism. In the excerpt below from *Don't Mourn for Us* (1993), Sinclair provides an early conceptual argument for the use of identity-first language:

> Autism isn't something a person has, or a "shell" that a person is trapped inside. There's no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person--and if it were possible, the person you'd have left would not be the same person you started with. This is important, so take a moment to consider it: Autism is a way of being. It is not possible to separate the person from the autism. (p.1)

The use of person-first or identity-first language is a complex matter. Tensions exist and are often discussed within and outside autism communities about the use of either identifier. Sinclair and other autistic self-advocates (e.g. Lydia Brown and Nick Walker) claim of the use of autism as an identifier not only for themselves, but also for all autistic individuals. They do not consider autism to be pathological. The use of identity-first language relies on identifying as autistic and understanding that autism is viewed as a facet of human diversity. Some argue the use of person-first language

implies that autism is a condition or a disease (Ortega, 2009). Others have settled on using both person-first and identity-first language, determining many people with autism do not have a language preference (Duncan, 2011). Although these tensions impact the discussion of identity, there are connections to using identity-first language with the application of sociocultural concepts such as neurodiversity and autistic communities.

2.3.4 Neurodiversity

The neurodiversity paradigm has united many autistic individuals in a common cause with the neurodiversity movement. This stance originated with and continues to thrive with autistic self-advocates (Ortega, 2009; Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008). The neurodiversity paradigm promotes a positive perception of autism and serves as a response to the surrounding negative stigma (Kapp, Gillespie-Lynch, Sherman, & Hutman, 2014; Ortega, 2009). Within this paradigm the focus becomes one of diversity and difference rather than disability and highlights the social construction of disability. The use of identity-first language is one signifier of autism acceptance from a neurodiversity paradigm (Ortega, 2013: 2009). In their analysis of survey data, Kapp et al. (2014) determined that individuals equated a positive autistic identity with awareness of the neurodiversity paradigm and that neurodiversity is understood to be a biological difference. The celebration of an alternate neurology is the essence of the neurodiversity movement which supports autistic people in developing their own group culture and identity.

2.3.5 Autistic Communities

Becoming part of an autistic community is connected to developing a positive autistic identity. The concept of "autistic community" originated in the 1990s when Jim Sinclair and other autistic adults experienced a joyous phenomenon when sharing their autistic space with one another (Sinclair, 2010). *Autreat*, an annual retreat for autistic individuals, was started and at the time was the only formal organization by and for autistics (Sinclair, 2010). Bagatell (2010) provides insight on the role of in-person adult autistic groups. Her ethnographic work about one such group revealed many nuances surrounding the alternative culture that develops when groups of autistic adults meet in person. Both Sinclair (2010) and Bagetell (2010) detail what Ochs and Solomon (2010) describe as *autistic sociality*: the manner of socializing unique to autistics when not constrained by societal norms of socialization. The desire to socialize naturally, without constraints imposed by non-autistic peers, is one reason autistic people desire the opportunity to share spaces together.

2.4 Summary

The application of disability studies in education, feminist disability studies, critical autism studies, and sociocultural perspectives on social development and instruction guide this study in seeking to explore, unearth, and understand the social experiences of autistic adolescent girls in schools. Through the use of these frameworks and understanding the extant literature on social skills this study sits apart from the social skills research situated within medicalized models of disability. A sociocultural perspective on social skills instruction takes into account autistic identity, which is mired in cultural expectations depending on where one attends school, social categories of race, class, and gender, and experience being accepted

within an identity community. Additionally, there is a gap in the research concerning school-based experiences of autistic adolescents, more those who identify as female.

This study addresses these research concerns through exploring the experiences of four teenage autistic young women who identify as female, girl, or young woman. I aimed to know more about and learn from their perspectives on undergoing social skills instruction, using those social skills at school, and then understanding connections to their autistic identity development. The phenomenological methodology I applied to this study in order to learn about the experiences of these students is detailed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

METHOD

The perspectives of four adolescent autistic young women are explored in this study to better understand their school-based social skills instruction. I chose a phenomenological research method to complete this in-depth exploration of their experiences undergoing social skills instruction. Phenomenological methods are often applied to understand the experiences of others and unearth the meaning of an experience from the participant perspective (Creswell, 2007). This method is well-suited to understanding the components of my research questions seeking to learn about their perspectives on gendered socialization experiences and autistic identity development in high school.

This methods chapter starts with a re-stating of the research questions, then moves into a summary of phenomenology as a research method in general, including a brief discussion on feminist phenomenology. I continue with an in-depth discussion of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the phenomenological method I have chosen for this research. Next, I summarize the IPA methods I applied and then I describe researcher positionality, study contexts, and demographics. Descriptions of data collection and analyses follow.

3.1 Research Questions

My research questions for this study explore the unique perspectives of the female autistic students' experiences with social skills instruction and make

connections to their broader social worlds within their schools. Additionally, I am interested to know more about how the experience of learning social skills in school could influence their autistic identity.

1. What are the perspectives of adolescent autistic students who identify as female, girl, or young woman on their experiences learning and using social skills in high school?

    i. How do these students interpret and make use of the social skills instruction they receive?

    ii. What other school-based experiences contribute to the students' perspectives on learning and using social skills?

4. How does the ongoing work of learning social skills at school, via instruction or otherwise, contribute to the students' perspectives on the development of an autistic/disability identity?

3.2 Phenomenology as Research Method

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) acknowledge that all qualitative research inherently seeks to discover common phenomenon. A phenomenological research method differs from other qualitative methods due to the explicit nod toward the discipline of phenomenological philosophy and the attempt to understand the participant experience. This research method involves the interaction with and interpretation of another's perception of the experience under study. Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) summarize phenomenological study as:

> Rather than attempting to reduce a phenomenon to a convenient number of identifiable variables and control the context in which the phenomenon will be studied, phenomenology aims to remain as faithful as possible to the phenomenon and to the context in which it appears in the world. This means that to study a particular phenomenon, a situation is sought in which individuals have first-hand experiences that they can describe as they actually took place in their life. The aim is to capture as closely as possible the way in which the

> phenomenon is experienced within the context in which the experience takes place. (pp. 26-27)

Thus, a phenomenological research project involves seeking out first-hand experience within the unique social context of the participant(s). The researcher aims to unearth understanding of their experience through reporting on the unique perception of each person in the study.

3.2.1 Feminist Phenomenology

Drawing from the feminist disability studies framework discussed in Chapter 2, it should be noted that phenomenology is largely founded on the ideas developed by white, able-bodied, European, cis-gender males. Despite these underpinnings, the application of phenomenological research methods can be used to support the aims of feminist research. Garko (1999) details how feminist research benefits from the use of a phenomenological method. In particular, the discursive political and structural components to a phenomenon can be interrogated with this method in order to develop new feminist theoretical concepts. With regard to this study, the use of a phenomenological method amplifies the experiences of the autistic female students, highlighting and contextualizing their understanding of social skills and autism. The interpretation of the data encompasses contextual theoretical concepts salient to feminist theory, related the students' intersectional experience of identifying as autistic and female in a school setting.

3.2.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

I have chosen to apply Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the research method for this dissertation study. It is well-suited to understanding experiences related to transitions and identity, two salient components of my research

questions about autistic adolescent girls' experiences with social skills programming at school. IPA was initially developed by Jonathan Smith as a method for qualitative research in psychology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Also, IPA is applied across disciplines beyond psychology, recently emerging in educational and autism research contexts (e.g. Maghzi, 2018).

IPA blends foundational phenomenological philosophical ideas to support research specifically focused on experiences. Smith and colleagues (2009) detail three applications of phenomenological concepts in IPA: 1) understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology; 2) hermeneutics, or how the data is interpreted into an understanding of the experience; 3) idiography, which influences the importance on development of an in-depth analysis. Each of these concepts are expanded on in this section.

3.2.2.1 Philosophical Underpinnings

In this brief exploration of the foundations for IPA I narrowed this discussion of phenomenology to the philosophers Husserl and Heidegger in order to highlight the phenomenological concepts that are most salient to this study. Husserl's contribution is toward descriptive phenomenology and Heidegger's is on the interpretative end. I describe how the difference between descriptive and interpretative phenomenology had consequence for determining the type of phenomenological research method that was best suited for this project (Lopez & Willis, 2004). IPA applies the influence of Husserl's descriptive phenomenology on Heidegger's interpretative take to develop this phenomenological research method.

The philosophical study of phenomenology is a humanist orientation seeking to better understand the nature of human consciousness, which is accomplished

through unraveling how we understand experiences (Giorgi, 2008). IPA constructs the foundation for this research method by highlighting key concepts from phenomenological philosophers Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. Examination of an experience requires understanding how individuals construct their own conscious reality and "what appears in consciousness is phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p.25). Although each individual has their unique perception of reality, there are instances in which we have common experiences which result in *phenomenon.* We actively engage with the world through our embodied experiences, or our being. Phenomenology is the philosophy exploring these fundamental understandings of human experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2005).

The 20th century philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger are credited for the initial development of key phenomenological ideas, which led to empirical phenomenological research methods. Husserl is widely regarded as the initial founder of phenomenology within the philosophical discipline. His focus was specifically on development of descriptive phenomenology. Husserl's student Heidegger, on the other hand, developed interpretative phenomenology, or phenomenological hermeneutics (Lopez & Willis, 2004). While these ideas reside conceptually in separate understanding of human experience, each type of phenomenology lends itself to key insights that impact IPA.

Descriptive phenomenology refers to Husserl's take on understanding perception as a response to his observation of positivistic understandings of scientific disciplines. Psychological research and phenomenology emerged around the same time period in the 20th century. Phenomenology evolved as a direct response to behaviorism, which had emerged from psychological research as the dominant lens to

understand humanity. Husserl advocated instead for first gathering information about how the world is perceived. He sought to understand consciousness via the human perspective, with a focus on a *return to things themselves* (Ashworth, 2003).

Husserl developed a phenomenological method in order to accomplish a phenomenological attitude, which would assist with individual reflection on our perception of things in our world (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). Several components are used to successfully achieve a phenomenological attitude, starting with bracketing and then moving on to a series of phenomenological reductions. Bracketing, or *epoch*, puts aside the world that we already know and take for granted. This is done in order to separate oneself from this greater world in order to concentrate solely on the essential nature of the phenomenon. This method continues with a series of phenomenological reductions to offer alternative reasonings about the phenomenon. A phenomenological attitude should conclude with the culmination of bracketing and the reductions that will lead us to knowing the essence of the experience being observed (Finlay, 2012; Smith, et al., 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Ultimately, Husserl developed this method in order to come to an understanding of the nature of human consciousness through our experiences.

The Husserlian bracketing procedure has been reconsidered by phenomenological researchers. Finlay (2012) outlines the myriad considerations to bracketing, stipulating differences in how a phenomenological philosopher and a phenomenological researcher might approach bracketing. She concludes when conducting phenomenological research, a researcher's reflexivity should remain a key consideration when undertaking a phenomenological research project. Additionally, Smith and colleagues (2009) describe how a formal bracketing procedure is not

required when undertaking a phenomenological research method such as IPA. Rather than bracket apart from one's experience, they utilize a reflective process while undergoing interviews with the study participants as well as careful awareness of engagement with the participant. Their recommendation for bracketing resides in the data analysis component of the IPA research process. When completing analysis for multiple cases, they advise the researcher to consider each case as separate from each other, in order to maintain an individualized focus on the experiences of the participants in each case.

Heidegger pivots on the Husserlian concepts of descriptive phenomenology with a hermeneutic turn. He applied hermeneutics, the historical interpretation of texts, to phenomenology as an interpretative approach to the appearance of phenomenon (Smith, et al, 2009). Heidegger focused on written language as a universally shared aspect to humanity. This interpretation of experience, to him what constitutes *being*, is accomplished through language (Gadamer, 2004). According to Heidegger, each individual is hermeneutic, or an interpreter of their own world, which includes their preconceived assumptions. This stands apart from Husserl's phenomenology, as he situated the phenomenon within understanding the experience. Heidegger's take on phenomenon instead lies in how the experience is interpreted (Ashworth, 2003). This interpretative view also considered the holistic component to perception of experience. Our individual experience of consciousness along with social contexts that make up our culture all play a part in development of how we perceive and interpret our experiences. This embrace of the external world on an individual's perception of an experience again calls into question the need for bracketing to accomplish a phenomenological attitude (Smith, et al., 2009).

IPA uses a general understanding of the iterative nature of the philosophy of phenomenological experience and honors the historical foundations this philosophy rests upon. This historical input provides the rationale for the interpretative component in IPA. Smith and colleagues (2009) state:

> Thus, through the work of all these writers, we have come to see that the complex understanding of 'experience' invokes a lived process, an unfurling of perspectives and meanings, which are unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world. In IPA research, our attempts to understand other people's relationship to the world are necessarily *interpretive,* and will focus upon their attempts to make *meanings* out of their activities and to the things happening to them. (p.21, emphasis in original)

In keeping with IPA, I apply the interpretative component of phenomenology. This resulted in focusing on the key components of IPA: hermeneutics and idiography.

3.2.2.2 Hermeneutics

Phenomenological hermeneutics supports the interpretative piece of IPA. This component uses foundational ideas stemming from three hermeneutic phenomenologists, Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer. Hermeneutics as textual interpretation resides within its own discipline; however, it has been taken up specifically by hermeneutic phenomenologists, with Heidegger being the most influential philosopher for this area. The concepts outlined by these philosophers build upon each other to support the need to understand how we interpret experience through text and through the interaction with participants in the study. Researchers can incorporate interpretation more holistically, through understanding the iterative nature of analysis, as described by Smith and colleagues:

> …we may move back and forth through a range of different ways of thinking about the data…As one moves back and forth through this process, it may help to think of one's relationship to the data as shifting

> according to the hermeneutic circle, too. The idea is that our entry into the meaning of the text can be made at a number of different levels, all of which relate to one another, and many of which will offer different perspectives on the part-whole coherence of the text. (p.28)

In particular, the application of the hermeneutic circle to this research method is a key component to understanding interpretation. Within this component there are separate parts that make up the whole of an interpretation. Smith (2004) discusses the *double hermeneutic*, which takes into account the researcher's perspective on the participant's perspective on the phenomenon under study. For this study, I utilized the hermeneutic circle to make interpretation of interview data provided by female autistic students.

3.2.2.3 Idiography

Idiography is the final influence on IPA. This component seeks to unearth the *particular* of the phenomena under study. Rather than attempting to determine a broad-based claim about a group or population, this focus promotes unearthing detailed information, keeping in mind the contextual components, about the phenomena's event, process, or relationship from the perspective of the participants. Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) detail how this focus on the particular is couched within broader phenomenological theory. A phenomenon is caught up in both the broader contextual relationships to other people and environmental stimuli, but also the importance of understanding the phenomenon is the person's perspective on their "relationship to, or involvement in, various phenomena of interest" (p.29). An idiographic focus is a key component to this study, as I consider each student as a separate case, providing her unique insights into the phenomenon of experiencing social skills instruction.

3.3 Methodology

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) provide detailed description on how to embark on a research study using IPA. Semi-structured interviews are completed with each participant for the majority of the data collection. The interviews are then transcribed for analysis. Other data artifacts, particularly those created by the participants, are also encouraged for use as data in an IPA study (Smith, 2004). In this study, the student participants took photos of spaces and people at their school that have social importance to them. Artifacts such as these photographs are incorporated into the thematic data analysis.

Due to both the idiographic and double hermeneutic commitments IPA applies an iterative coding process. Initially a close reading of the individual cases in the study must occur, with notes and preliminary themes developed for each case. Then, after reading through the cases, further thematic development is unearthed, which focus on points of convergence and divergence. The data can also be read for other interpretations, such as the participant's use of social comparison, metaphor, or their temporal sense (Smith, 2004).

3.3.1 Researcher Positionality

IPA does not require formalized researcher bracketing procedures. It acknowledges the researcher's positionality is not separate from the research being completed. Although an account of researcher positionality is not a specified component to IPA, qualitative research in general benefits from researcher reflexivity, as my cultural attitudes cannot be teased from development of and analysis of my research (Milner, 2007). Finlay (2012) elaborates on the need for hermeneutic phenomenological researchers to engage in a reflexive practice:

> In short, they are engaged in continually reflecting on interpretations of both their experience and the phenomenon being studied so as to move beyond the partiality of previous understandings and investment in particular research outcomes (Finlay, 2003). (p. 179).

A self-reflective statement on my positionality is provided here to determine where my understandings about the students' experiences in this study have been influenced by my role as a researcher. My statement below describes my researcher positionality as it relates to my cultural demographics as well as my prior experiences as a teacher and my interactions with autistic people.

I am a white, able-bodied, cis-gender, in a heterosexual marriage. We are a middle-class family with two school-age, gender conforming children who attend public school. My upbringing and postsecondary education took place in majority white suburbia in middle class socioeconomic contexts. I also identify as having a minor learning disability in math that was self-diagnosed in adulthood. I am not autistic, and I do not have any family members who identify as autistic.

My path toward understanding autism developed as an educator to autistic students and other professional roles. The first encounters I had with autistic people were with very young children in field placements during my undergraduate teacher educator program in early childhood and special education. Later, I was employed in various roles as an educator. During my time in these positions I completed an array of behaviorally-based professional development trainings. I was also employed on a part-time basis during the school year and summer as a coach with a theatrical-based social skills program for autistic teens and young adults. Additionally, I was employed as a behavior specialist consultant with the state wraparound human services department to work with autistic children, families, and teachers.

Concurrent to these employment experiences, I completed a postgraduate autism certificate and a master's degree in special education. All of my higher education experiences at the time were exclusively grounded in a medicalized, deficit-based model of disability. Once I started my doctoral program I worked with young adults with intellectual disabilities as part of our university's college program developed for these students. In subsequent years of my doctoral studies, I taught introduction to special education courses at the postsecondary level and utilized case studies, one of which was a profile of an autistic student. Discussions stemming from this case study led to students disclosing their personal experiences with autism and/or autistic students.

Soon after I started the doctoral program specializing in sociocultural and community-based approaches to education, I challenged myself to learn about a sociocultural approach to special education and I came across disability studies in education (DSE). Foundational to my moral and ethical disposition as an emerging scholar was my interest in learning more broadly about disability studies (DS) as a field. This led to a study I completed about an undergraduate DS course and attending the 2015 Society for Disability Studies (SDS) conference. I attribute that conference and SDS in general as the impetus for my ventures into learning about neurodiversity and engaging with the works of autistic scholars and activists.

3.3.2 Study Context

This research took place in four high school communities located in Oregon. The geographical locations of the schools led me from the beautiful, rural Pacific coastal region to an urban cityscape, along with visits to a well-to-do suburban school and a school straddling between suburban and rural communities.

When studying autism contexts, discussion of racial and demographic details is a necessary component in conducting responsible research about autism and to understanding more about the sociocultural components of this disability label (Broder-Fingert, Silva, Silverstein, & Feinberg, 2017; Pierce, O'Reilly, Sorrells, Fragale, White, Aguilar, & Cole, 2014). Almost all of the people I personally interacted with throughout this study - from the front desk staff at the schools, to teachers and teaching assistants, and the participants themselves - could be read racially as white. This is inferred due to their light skin color as well as how we ascribed, with ease, to dominant white culture in our interactions with each other. The students participating in the study racially identified themselves to me as white. These interactions with mostly white people was to be expected. The State of Oregon has a sordid, racist past, which has resulted in a majority white population (see Table 3.1 for state demographics). The demographics of the individual schools are not reported here to protect confidentiality; however, the schools broadly reflect the state-wide demographics.

Additionally, at the start of the study I was a newcomer to Oregon, after relocating the prior year from Pennsylvania. I participated in Oregon's recent population growth spurt, with the majority of new residents migrating to the state from other parts of the country. The total state population grew 8.1% from 2010 to 2017 to reach a total population of 4.14 million (Office of Economic Analysis, 2017). One participant in this study also engaged in this relocation trend to Oregon.

Table 1 Oregon Racial Demographics

Race	White	African American	Native American	Asian & Pacific Islander	Two or More Races	Hispanic, all races
State percentage	76.4%	1.9%	1.1%	4.7%	3.1%	12.8%

(Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, cited in Office of Economic Analysis, 2017)

3.3.2.1 Autism in Oregon Schools

Following national trends, there are racial disparities for autistic students in Oregon (see Table 2), with more white students given an autism label than other racial categories. Additionally, at the national level more male students are given an autism label than female students. Nationally, there are intersections with socioeconomic status, as children from higher SES groups are given an autism label more readily (Durkin, Maenner, Meaney, Levy, DiGuiseppi, Nicholas JS, et al., 2010).

Table 2 IDEA Data for School-Age Students Labeled with Autism in Oregon in 2017

Race/Ethnicity	Hispanic/ Latino	Am. Indian/ Alaskan Native	Black/ African American	Asian	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	White	2 or more races	Total

Number of school age students with autism	1,517	124	395	191	40	6406	615	9288

(Source: 2017-2018 IDEA Federal Reports, Oregon Department of Education)

3.3.3 Sample

3.3.3.1 Recruitment

Using purposive and convenience sampling, I applied several recruitment tactics over the course of four months in the fall of 2017. After several attempts at emailing professional contacts the IRB approved study materials (e.g. flyer summarizing the study, detailed email of the study components, consent forms) (see appendix for flyer and consent forms), these initial attempts did not result in any recruitment. However, as a result of this initial recruitment wave, I was invited to conduct a professional development talk about autism and gender issues with a group of autism specialists. After that talk, I heard back from three of the autism specialists that they had successfully recruited students to participate in the study. One student was recruited through a teacher acquaintance who suggested I contact a public charter school, which I had not previously considered. After emailing the recruitment materials to that school, a teacher replied with contact information for further discussion with the student and her parent.

3.3.3.2 Autistic Young Women Student Participants

The primary participants in this study are four autistic adolescent young women: Maia, Ninja, Ernie, and Tayson. Each student chose a pseudonym for use throughout the study. The interviews took place when they were either 14 or 15 years old while attending a high school program when they were in 9th or 10th grade during the 2017-2018 school year. Each girl was identified as having an autism label by the initial contact person, who was an autism specialist, their parent, or themselves, and had been enrolled in social skills instruction at school. My definition of social skills instruction was very broad, encompassing embedded instruction throughout the school day, social-emotional courses, one-on-one discussions with a teacher, or social skills instruction in a class with an autism specialist or special educator. The students were willing to discuss school-based social skills instruction experiences, as well as aspects of their autistic identity. The high schools were located in different geographical locations in the state of Oregon (see table 3 for details about each participant and their high school).

Table 3 Student Demographic Data

Student	Age	Race	Grade	Self-identified labels	High school	Interview setting	Community description
Maia*	14	White	9th	Autism, Bi-Polar	Laurelwood H.S., 4- year public	During school hours, study hall period	Suburban/Rural

Ninja	15	White	10th	Autism, depression	Mountaintop H.S., 4- year public	During school hours, study hall period	Suburban
Ernie	15	White	10th	Autism	Evergreen Charter School, public charter	Directly after school in the school building	Urban
Tayson	15	White	9th	ADD, Social Anxiety, Asperger's	Greenway H.S., 4- year public	Directly after school in the school building	Rural

*All names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect confidentiality

3.3.3.3 Other Participants

Teachers or other school staff, such as autism specialists who worked closely with the students, were asked to complete a 1-hour interview. The information from these interviews assisted with understanding the context for the student's experiences. This interview supported my understanding of the schools' approaches to socialization, disability, and autism and provided a sense of the overall school culture.

Once consent and assent were completed by the parents and students during an introductory meeting (see appendix for consent and assent forms) I asked the students for suggestions about school staff I could talk to about their social skills experiences (see Table 4 for list of school personnel participating in the study). Then I informally spoke with these teachers about the interview, emailed them an invitation to participate with a copy of the consent form, and asked for possible dates for a first

meeting. Information from the student interviews was not shared with these participants

Table 4 School Personnel Demographic Data

Name	School	Race	Type of educator	Classes taught
Mr. Miranda*	Greenway H.S.	White	General Ed.	Exploration class, Philosophy, Study Hall
Ms. Armstrong	Mountaintop H.S.	White	Special Ed.	Social Skills, Study Hall
Ms. Connor	Mountaintop H.S.	White	Autism Specialist	Social Skills
Stanley	Evergreen Charter	White	General Ed.	World History, Social Studies, Group
Sarah	Evergreen Charter	White	General Ed.	Science, Exploration
Ms. Hatch	Laurelwood H.S.	White	Special Ed.	Resource Period
Ms. Reeves	Laurelwood H.S.	White	Autism Specialist	Social Skills

*All names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect confidentiality

Parents/guardians of the primary participants were asked to complete a take-home questionnaire about their views on autism and history of when their child was initially diagnosed (see appendix for questionnaire). Two of the four students' parents completed the questionnaire. The information was useful in my informal analysis of the context for these students' history with their autistic identity and social skills experiences.

3.3.4 Data Collection

3.3.4.1 Interviewing Autistic Students

Each student was interviewed three times and asked to take photos of social spaces in their school between the first and third interviews. Due to the depth of the questioning required to explore the research questions, I drew from Seidman's (2006) qualitative interview approach that outlines the use of three interviews. This was the best method for me to engage the students with the line of questioning needed to fully develop answers to the research questions. Additionally, throughout this process, I needed to acknowledge my outsider status as someone who is not autistic and make sure there was time between interviews for me to engage in reflection on my interpretation of their unique autistic experiences. This was completed by developing reflective field notes after each meeting, as well as either listening to or transcribing each interview prior to the next interview session with each student. These steps promoted reflection on the interview process and determined any minor adjustments to the interview protocol.

Research completed with autistic adolescents and adults using an IPA method has engaged in similar interviewing tactics. Similar to Huws and Jones (2015), I also took care to assure the autistic students that their participation was voluntary, and they knew they could leave the study at any time. There was an opt-out discussion with every student, where they were reminded that if they remembered at a later date that they did not want items stated in our interviews to be discussed, then that request would be honored. I also took measures to build rapport, as suggested by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) with each student by engaging in interactions that were not recorded. These interactions included chatting as we walked to the interview

locations and asking follow-up questions regarding school or events they mentioned in prior discussions. We also reviewed the snack/drink and gift card incentives (described in detail below) before and after each meeting, which often led to more rapport-building conversations about these items.

Rainsberry (2017) completed a study with three adolescent autistic girls about their general experiences with the aim to better understand issues salient to them. The researcher met independently with the parents, asked the students to complete diaries, then met with the students individually to review their diary entries. In a manner similar to Rainsberry, the students in this current study were asked to take photographs, then met with me to discuss their photographs. The photo discussions lead to a richer understanding about the importance of school spaces in their schools. This photo-elicitation interview methodology (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004), was applied to provide these students with a more literal accounting of how they embodied socialization in their school.

Each student was asked to discuss her experiences learning social skills at school over the course of three interviews (with Maia, we met four times, in order to fully discuss the photographs). The interviews were iteratively focused, which is a common process for IPA semi-structured interviewing (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009). They were completed in sequential order for each case, which allowed for additional lines of questions to occur that resulted from discussion in the previous interviews. The focus of each interview is described below (interview question schedules are provided in the appendix). Additionally, I observed three of the four students in their social skills instruction period at their school. By the start of the interview period, Tayson's trimester schedule at school had shifted to the second

trimester and she was no longer taking the class. For her class observation, I observed without Tayson present in the class. The teacher confirmed the class I observed was similar to the one she completed. The three main interviews were audio recorded. I then developed verbatim transcripts, using pseudonyms for people and places.

In general, people with disabilities are frequently studied by the academic community without compensation for their time and effort, yet their participation deepens our knowledge of disability. Due to the participants' position as young women with a disability label, a traditionally marginalized population, which historically experiences a 'double jeopardy' regarding paid employment experiences and outcomes (Lindstrom, Harwick, Poppen, & Doren, 2012) it was imperative that they were compensated for their efforts toward this dissertation study. The students were given a $25 gift card of their choosing after the completion of each of the three main interviews. To help with establishing rapport and a comfortable interviewing environment, I also offered a drink and/or snack of their choice during each interview and the final meeting.

3.3.4.1.1 Introductory meeting

An initial meeting was completed with each student to review the student assent form (if the parent was present their consent form was reviewed at that time as well) and discuss the study. These meetings were varied in how they were conducted and who was present at each meeting. Three of these meetings took place at the student's school. Due to scheduling conflicts with Tayson, this meeting was completed with her via text message, at her request, and over the phone with her parent.

3.3.4.1.2 Interview 1

This interview occurred after the student and their parents/guardians had provided consent and assent. The purpose of this interview was to ask the students general questions about their high school and gain a sense of their thoughts on their school, teachers, and friends at school.

3.3.4.1.3 Interview 2

The purpose of this interview was to engage the students in a description of their experiences learning social skills at their school. They were encouraged to be descriptive as possible through a series of questions designed to probe this issue creatively.

3.3.4.1.4 Interview 3

This interview was constructed to gain a sense of each student's autistic identity and relationship to school culture.

3.3.4.1.5 Student Observation

In order to gain further context about their experiences I arranged to observe each student during a class at school that consisted of social skills instruction or if that was not convenient to all parties, to observe the student while engaged in a social activity, such as a group project, an extracurricular activity, or other event as identified by the student or her teacher. The purpose of this observation was to assist my understanding of the social skill experiences the students undergo in their daily lives at school.

3.3.4.1.6 Final Meeting

After the data were analyzed, there was a final meeting with each student in October 2018 to review the analysis with them. Additional insights from each student were noted. No substantial changes were made to the analysis.

3.3.5 Photography Data

Between the first and third interviews, the students were asked to take photos around their school of spaces that had social meaning to them. If desired, they could adapt the photo(s) with technological resources, such as filters, or drawing applications. Ernie was the only student to use this option. This assignment was discussed during the introductory meeting and all provided consent to completing this aspect of the project. At the conclusion of either the first or second interview, we discussed the activity again. I then sent email instructions to the students who decided to take the photos independently. Collectively, the students took anywhere from 1-23 photos. Two of the four students used their personal cameras on their smart phones, then sent me the photo(s) via text message. One student completed the project using an iPad at school and her special education teacher emailed me the photos. I accompanied one student, Maia, on a 20-minute walk around the school while she took photos with my iPhone. All of the photos were emailed to her for her personal use. For three students, we took time during either the second or third interview to discuss the photos. Maia agreed to an additional meeting (without an additional gift card, but with a drink) to discuss the photos only, due to timing restrictions occurring the day we took the photos.

3.3.6 Data Analysis

Prior to the coding process I transcribed verbatim the interviews completed with each student. The transcripts developed from each interview were then uploaded into Dedoose, a qualitative coding software program. The interviews with the teachers were not transcribed, as the excerpts from their interviews were not salient aspects of the study. The teacher interview data assisted with my understanding of their experience of the curriculum and how the teachers determined the content of their social skills classes. This study is about the experiences of the four students and I wanted to maintain a case study approach that exclusively promoted their voices.

Keeping with the idiographic component of IPA, I viewed each student as an individual case, first starting the data process with development of individual student profiles. I then moved on to reading of the interview data. A line-by-line analysis of each case was completed while developing a unique list of themes pertaining to each case, as well as noting information pertinent to their social skills experiences. As I underwent the coding and thematic process, I followed several of the suggestions outlined by Smith and colleagues (2009). In keeping with the idiographic focus of this method each reading of the students' transcripts was regarded as a separate coding activity. When I read through each case, I developed a chronological list of the themes in a word document for each case. To develop this list, I used the processes of abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration and function described by Smith et al. (2009), which led to a list of emergent themes.

After emergent themes were completed for each student, I uploaded the master list to Dedoose and read through each transcript again. The software program allowed me to align specific excerpts that pertained to each theme. Parent and child code trees emerged as I went through the data, with additions and deletions ongoing until all of

the transcripts were read through again. Additions were made when I noticed I was putting excerpts in codes that I found to be insufficiently descriptive (e.g. expanding the "boys" parent code to include child codes like "classmates" or "older"). Deletions were made when I noticed that there was little use for the code, or that it was described better elsewhere (e.g. deletion of a broad "social skills instruction" code in favor of the child codes under the "social skills," or "teachers" parent codes).

Once all of the transcripts were read with excerpts aligned with each code in Dedoose, I wanted to collapse the codes into broad themes. This was completed through a low-tech process with note cards of the codes that corresponded to each research question. Then, I compiled the themes in a separate thematic document for each student and uploaded the appropriate excerpts that corresponded with each theme. Analysis and interpretation of the data were ongoing during this process.

Once this initial analysis was completed, I scheduled the follow-up interviews with each student in order to determine agreement in analysis of their experiences. A document for each student was developed, loosely structured using the themes and codes that I had completed. The development of this document prompted me to create questions for them regarding my interpretation of their experiences. The follow-up interview consisted of an overview and clarification of factual data, as well as inquiring about my interpretations. Updates were made to the thematic document after the follow-up interview. I then drafted the final analytic description for each code with deeper, interpretative analysis incorporated as a natural part of the writing process.

When I collapsed the codes from Dedoose into broader themes, the research questions guided this process. I determined that the way the students were interpreting and making use of their social skills instruction, which addresses the first research

question, was in three different contexts. The students identified a) the specific skills learned and used, b) the way social skills were instructed and c) intersections and understandings of the role of gender in their social skills classes. For the second part of the first inquiry, I was seeking to understand the school-based experiences that contributed to their perspective on learning and using social skills. This led me to look for instances when the students mentioned a) friendship, b) male peers, c) daily structure at school, and d) school-based activities. The second question asked about their perspective on autistic/disability identity and the contribution of learning social skills at school. Four themes arouse to address this inquiry, a) the impact of autism at school, b) the masking/unmasking impulse, c) marking autistic identity, and d) autism at the intersection of gender. See Tables 5-7 for descriptions of the final themes analyzed in the following chapters.

Table 5 Question 1a Themes

1a. How do these students interpret and make use of the social skills instruction they receive?	
Theme 1. The specific skills learned and used	Description of the social skills they remembered learning, if they were used outside of the classroom, and relevance of the social skills.
Theme 2. The social skills instruction	How social skills was taught, in the classroom, individualized, embedded throughout the school day. Who taught social skills and the students' impressions of their social skills teacher(s).
Theme 3. Social skills and gender	The experience being the only autistic girl in the social skills learning context.

Table 6 Question 1b. Themes

1b. What other school-based experiences contribute to the students' perspectives on learning and using social skills?	
Theme 1. Friendship	Social skills were applied with friends who had varying roles including supporting, and people to practice with. Also the desire for making new friends at school.
Theme 2. Male peers	How interactions with boys and young men at school required different social skills and the overall impression of the male peers.
Theme 3. Daily structure at school	The socialization and subsequent use of social skills when in specific spaces in the school or with specific people, including classrooms, lunch, working in groups, school staff.
Theme 4. School-based activities	Participation in extra-curricular activities and school-based activities as an opportunity to socialize and use social skills with other students or community members.

Table 7 Question 2 Themes

2. How does the ongoing work of learning social skills at school, via instruction or otherwise, contribute to the students' perspectives on the development of an autistic/disability identity?	
Theme 1. The impact of autism at school	How the students navigated autistic mannerisms and traits and their unique sensory experiences at school.
Theme 2. The masking/unmasking impulse	The students' description of passing and masking behavior
Theme 3. Marking autistic identity	How the students learned about autism or disability

Theme 4. Autism at the intersection of gender	The experience and intersections of identifying as a girl and being autistic or neurodivergent.

3.3.7 Trustworthiness

In order to establish trustworthiness, I utilized the approach offered by Smith and colleagues (2009), drawn from Yardley (2000), which are: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

3.3.7.1 Sensitivity to Context

To establish context, I provided a literature review of the existing information about the social skills experiences of autistic teenage girls, as well as provided context for the various methods used to teach social skills. This led to findings that were relevant to what is already known about this phenomenon. I also paid close attention to the particular, the idiographic component, of this study by providing each student their own section that singles out their individual experiences. When completing my interpretation of the data, I continually examined how the words of the students connected to the research questions, which were purposefully asked in a clear and unambiguous manner.

3.3.7.2 Commitment and Rigor

Smith and colleagues state that commitment is demonstrated in the "degree of attentiveness to the participant during data collection and the care with which the analysis of each case is carried out" (p.181). I expressed commitment during data collection by carefully constructing my interview questions, with each interview consisting of specific focus that led to the student being more comfortable discussing information that was first factual about their school experiences and then moving on to

asking more interpretative questions about their experiences. Comfort during the interviews was attempted through providing the food and drink choice as well as compensation in the form of a $25 gift card of their choosing.

Rigor refers to "the thoroughness of the study…the appropriateness of the sample to the question…the quality of the interview and the completeness of the analysis undertaken" (p. 181). I accomplished this through recruiting a sample that was the suggested appropriate size for the method and recruiting students who all could respond to the inquiries in support of the research questions. As stated above, the interview series was intentionally constructed to support the research questions as well as taking care to support the students in their comfort with answering the questions. Through the idiographic engagement with my analysis, the use of the case study approach to displaying the findings highlighted the particular about each student and the themes. I also liberally used the words of the students to demonstrate how they experienced each theme.

3.3.7.3 Transparency and Coherence

In this methods chapter I addressed transparency by clearly stating the nature of this IPA research method, how I went about each step of the method and the thematic creation. Coherence refers to the logic of the themes and the argument that is crafted over the entirety of the study. I accomplish coherence by coming back to the research questions in every chapter and explicitly stating how the themes highlight points of similarity and differences across the participants.

3.3.7.4 Impact and Importance

This refers to how well the research addresses an area of importance and usefulness. Due to the dearth of scholarship dedicated to understanding the experiences of autistic girls and young women in schools, this study fulfills this area of making an impact on research in this field.

3.4 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I outlined how phenomenological research methods draw from philosophical phenomenological foundations. Phenomenological research methods support research developed in frameworks rooted in feminist theory, as well as disability studies in education and critical autism studies. The decision to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis supports my research questions and allows for expansion on the themes in subsequent chapters. Profiles of Maia, Ninja, Ernie, and Tayson are included in the next chapter as an avenue to become acquainted with these young women. I discuss the themes that emerged from the coding process described here, focusing on connections to the research questions.

Chapter 4

FINDINGS

This chapter details my interpretation of Maia, Ninja, Ernie, and Tayson's social skills experiences at school. First, this introductory section beings with restatement of the research questions and then the themes will be displayed with a definition and summary under each query. After this introduction each student will be divided into separate cases and sections of this chapter. The cases are introduced with narrative profiles of each student in order to provide a holistic context to them as individuals. I hope to communicate the essence of their relationships at school, provide a general sense of their school culture and greater community, as well as a brief description of their experience learning social skills. Then I move on to their experiences with each theme, which will be organized under each research question. Finally, I conclude this chapter with final thoughts on this analysis of their experiences. All names of people, places, or other identifying information have been given a pseudonym or changed in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

4.1 Research Questions

1. What are the perspectives of adolescent autistic students who identify as female, girl, or young woman on their experiences learning and using social skills in high school?

    i. How do these students interpret and make use of the social skills instruction they receive?

ii. What other school-based experiences contribute to the students' perspectives on learning and using social skills?

2. How does the ongoing work of learning social skills at school, via instruction or otherwise, contribute to the students' perspectives on the development of an autistic/disability identity?

4.2 Description of Themes

4.2.1 1a. How Do These Students Interpret and Make Use of the Social Skills Instruction They Receive?

With regard to the student's interpretation of their social skills instruction, it was clear they had specific understandings of which social skills they learned in their classes that were important to them. They described these specific skills within the context of their classes, discussing their impressions of their teachers, the quality of the instruction, and how the instruction occurred. The students expanded on this instruction experience to discuss how the skills were practiced and used in their lives.

4.2.1.1 Theme 1. The Specific Skills Learned and Used

The students learned fundamental concepts about socializing while at school. Examples of these social skills included learning how to be aware of others' reactions when talking together or having conversations. In conjunction with the skills they learned, the students also expanded on how they incorporated the social skills they learned in school into their daily lives. At times, they determined on their own which skills they wanted to work on and then would leverage being in a school setting, surrounded by other people, to practice those skills. Often, their social skill practice was a temporal event, where they talked about learning the social skill in their past and then consciously making use of it over time and anticipating it's use in the future. The

students frankly discussed what it was like to learn social skills at school and had very different interpretations on the meaning of that experience.

Much of the research literature on social skills instruction discusses generalizing the social skills that are taught in the social skills class, which the students were doing at school. However, the student's own understandings of the generalizability of socializing was much more in depth and related to the relevance of the skill to their school and personal lives. Often, they chose to work on specific social skills on their own. These were not social skills they were explicitly taught. Having the support of a teacher who understood this practice they were doing on their own assisted in their venture to work on a social skill. They could lean on these teachers for assistance if it was needed.

4.2.1.2 Theme 2. The Social Skills Instruction

The student's view of their social skills teachers was highlighted throughout our interviews. Often, they correlated their enjoyment of the class to their view of the teacher and the quality of the instruction. This was connected to their understanding of the pedagogical decisions used by the teachers. They had reflections on the class activities that were preferred or non-preferred. Then they continued with their perceptions of themselves as learners and whether the social skills teacher was providing them with instruction that worked with their learning style.

4.2.1.3 Theme 3. Social Skills and Gender

This theme refers to how the students discussed their experiences being a girl in their social skills classes. Some of the students experienced being an "other" either due to their gender or due to their autism label. This theme also explores how they

understand their gender while undergoing social skills instruction at school. While each student experienced their social skills instruction in very different ways, they expressed interest in undergoing that same class in a girls-only capacity. Each student felt there might be more understanding if they were to engage in a girls-only class structure.

4.2.2 1b. What Other School-Based Experiences Contribute to the Students' Perspectives on Learning and Using Social Skills?

When considering "other school-based experiences" the students spoke to how they were situated within the larger context of their school and the people involved with them in that context. The school-based experiences were clearly delineated by the students with regard to their mention of people and then the impact of spaces in the school. I begin this section with the summary of the two themes related to relationships friendships and male peers, and teachers, then I move on to the themes related to activities and school spaces.

4.2.2.1 Theme 1. Friendship

The students valued their friendships. They spoke about their friends at every interview, their experience with comradery and experience with loss of friendships, in different ways that affected their view of friends. They discussed how they conceptualize friendships, where friendships occur, and their history with making and keeping friends. The friendships were wide-ranging, from Maia experiencing her friendships in school only, to Ernie's dynamic friendships with homosexual and non-binary peers, and Tayson's long term friendships with a few close friends, and Ninja's friendships mostly residing online, with no friends at school.

4.2.2.2 Theme 2. Male peers

The male peer presence at school, both in their social skills class and in their school life in general, was observed by all of the students. Males who were their ages, around 14 and 15 years old, were broadly considered to be loud and disruptive. There were exceptions made for male peers who were their significant other, and boys who were not disruptive, and who were older. Some of the students expanded on how older male peers were easier to get along with. Additionally, they spoke about their past and present stance on males in the role as a significant other.

4.2.2.3 Theme 3. School Socialization

Socializing with adults and students was embedded throughout each students' school day. The students discussed their experience with the special education system and how they felt it impacted their socialization at school, in particular their feeling of being restricted by their teachers. Each student was also enrolled in general education classes. Often, their favorite and most preferred teachers were general educators who helped them feel understood. Each student reflected on the activities and assignments that their favorite teachers assigned, which supported their engagement with the teacher and with the class. Their construction of a preferred versus least preferred teacher was often connected to what they perceived was the teacher's understanding of autism and then each student's ideas on how they learned best.

4.2.2.4 Theme 4. School-based Activities

Aside from their regular academic classes, the students could decide to take school-based clubs or extracurricular activities. Maia and Tayson were in choir, where they had the opportunity to socialize and go on trips with those groups. Ninja did not engage in school-based activities. Ernie engaged in some activities, often choosing to

participate in one-off events, rather than a club that met regularly. It was clear that regardless if they participated in a school-based activity, that they had mulled over the social skills involved and their level of enjoyment in the activity.

4.2.3 2. How Does the Ongoing Work of Learning Social Skills at School, via Instruction or Otherwise, Contribute to the Students' Perspectives on the Development of an Autistic/Disability/Neurodivergent Identity?

This second research question led to conversations about how being autistic affected their overall experiences at school. They discussed the impact of their sensory needs at school, their perception and definition of autism, how they viewed identity-first language, and their thoughts on neurodiversity. We discussed how they came to understand autism and how feeling different from the other students led them to learn about understanding how and when to conform to neurotypical culture.

4.2.3.1 Theme 1. The Impact of Autism on School

Their daily life at school was impacted by being autistic and intersected with many of the themes already described. Each student discussed her issues dealing with sensory stimulations that occurred at school and the school's response to their sensory needs. They also spoke about their passions and how they were able to either socialize with others at their school about similar affinity for shared interests, or not. Additionally, there were times when they were able to directly apply their passions to assignments or classes.

4.2.3.2 Theme 2. The Masking Impulse

Each student discussed their relationships with her autism or neurodiversity label both within their school and then related it back to herself. They understood they were set apart from the other students as different. At times they were explicit and

stated this understanding within the construct normal or not normal. For some of the students it was a point of pride that it was difficult to tell if they were autistic, for other students they deeply felt and understood their autism as setting them apart from the rest of the school population. Their attempts to not act too autistic or neurodivergent had implications for when they disclosed being autistic to friends, as it was often something that had to be unearthed. The student's decision to disclose often resided in their realization that their friends needed to have additional understanding about them and their behaviors.

4.2.3.3 Theme 3. Marking Autistic Identity

We discussed several markers that highlight understanding of autism as it related to identifying as an autistic person. These markers traversed their history of being autistic, which included conversations about going through the diagnostic procedures to be given the official autism label, identity first language, how autism impacted their daily lives, and where they were learning about autism (e.g. online, reading books). Additionally, some of the students took to the practice of discerning autistic traits in fictionalized characters, which demonstrated their ability to recognize autism in others, based on their previous experiences and research about autism. They also discussed the number of autistic people they engaged with on a regular basis, realizing the importance in knowing other autistic people in general. In school, they did not have close friendships with other autistic girls or women Within the context of their families, several of the students talked about conversations about autism, or additional supports like counseling or medication.

4.2.3.4 Theme 4. Autism at the Intersection of Gender

There was an intersectional component to these student's social lives at school and how that impacted their school experience. While all of the themes discussed here could undergo an intersectional analysis, in keeping with the organization of the research questions proposed for this study, this research resides at the intersection of autism and gender. This theme focused on the impact of their understandings of their gender as a female, girl, or young woman and any intersections with autism. Each student conceptualized identifying with their gender differently. They felt autism or neurodivergent traits, which affected each person differently, regardless of gender.

4.3 Idiographic Focus

In keeping with the idiographic focus of the IPA method this analysis is completed with the understanding that each student's experience will have commonalities as well as differences. Also, the essence of that experience will reside within their own perception of that experience. The remainder of this chapter will situate each student as a separate case within their own section. The student sections will begin with a descriptive profile of their school lives with details about the interview locations, characteristics of the students and their schools, and highlights of their social skills learning experiences. Then, I will move on to how each student discussed their experience with the themes introduced above. This organization of the findings is purposeful, as each theme was determined to be a commonality among the students, however the manner in which they discussed each theme is unique to their own individual experience. I found it best to display what they have in common as well as where they differ within their own individual context in order to honor their experience as their own.

Each student's experiences, their responses, and manner of conducting the interviews were unique throughout the data collection process. The interviews proved to be distinctively interpersonal across cases, from the places we held the interviews, to interactions with the teachers, and the students' enthusiasm in responding to my open-ended questions. Truly, each interview with these young women evolved into separate points of inquiry and understanding of components of their experiences. My interpretation of their responses was situated within my observations of the culture of their schools and my discussions with their teachers. Each of these places and the people involved were different in scope. This dynamic analysis of the interview data resulted in findings that speak to points of similarity and difference pertaining to each theme in Maia, Ninja, Ernie, and Tayson's experiences.

4.4 Maia Kai Sikhon

4.5 Profile

Maia was the fourth student recruited for this study. She was a 14-year-old freshman attending Laurelwood High School (LHS). Referral to the study came from Ms. Reeves, Maia's autism specialist. Ms. Reeves had worked with Maia for several years and established relationships with the pertinent people to accomplish Maia's consent to participate in this study. An array of logistical tasks was completed by Ms. Reeves prior to my first visit to the school: she pursued initial communication with Maia's parents about the study, distributed the consent form to Maia and her parents, collected the completed consent form from the parent, worked with school personnel to determine where and when the interviews could take place in Maia's school, and she introduced me to Maia and her special education case manager at the school. Maia

was very enthusiastic to participate in the study. She is passionate about food and was enthralled when I brought her a snack and a drink to our interviews.

Due to school regulations to meet in a public area of the school, Maia and I met in a large, commons area, which had plenty of tables and chairs for setting up an interview. People would pass by regularly, or other students gathered around the vending machines near our table. Maia's friendly demeanor was evident as she greeted students or teachers passing by us during each interview. Maia was rather candid and very talkative. Our meeting time was during her study hall period with her case manager.

LHS was a public 4-year high school serving students in a large area that is considered to be a mix of suburban and rural, depending on where the students live. According to Ms. Reeves and Ms. Hatch, Maia's special education case manager, the community around the school was struggling with issues related to lack of financial resources and drug addiction. The school consisted of a compact 3-building campus, with one of the buildings functioning as a technical school. LHS had student-made posters adorning the hallways advertising school events or clubs, as well as university pennants hung up in the hallways from institutions all over the country. Additionally, colorful murals were painted on several of the school walls. Maia was in general education for most of her classes. She had a resource room period with Ms. Hatch, who was one of Maia's least preferred teachers.

Maia was aware of her IEP and knew that social skills was one component. She had been in social skills classes led by Ms. Reeves since she was in middle school. Maia enjoyed these classes and attempted to work outside of the class on those skills she learned. This helped her with longstanding issues she had with her family

and with having conversations with her friends. Maia also had bipolar disorder, which she referred to periodically, however she did not feel that being bipolar affected being autistic. In general, Maia liked school and spoke positively about the relationships she had with other students and adults. She did not like working with Ms. Hatch, but she enjoyed many of her other teachers and classes. Maia had a strained relationship with her family. During our interviews she often brought up her family and then would navigate the conversation back to her school experiences.

The teachers who allowed Maia to talk and engage in assignments creatively were her favorites. She enjoyed crafting, playing online games, making up languages, and making videos using an online platform called *PlayBuzz.* Additionally, Maia had an extended special interest in birds, with detailed plans to be a doctoral level ornithologist conducting research on blue macaws in Brazil. Maia completed her own research and read about autism online. She was the only participant who had read an autism memoir. Maia and I spoke in detail about the experience of passing and her attempts to be "normal" when she was in school.

Maia's friendships resided exclusively at school. She seemed to be perpetually grounded and had not seen her friends outside school, aside from the random meeting in the community at a local restaurant or store. She participated in choir as a class at school and an extracurricular where she has gone on several community outings with the group. Maia considered many classmates to be her friends. Most of her friendships were with students receiving special education services. These students were in her social skills group, as well as other students who she indicated had a disability label. She moved into the Laurelwood community when she was in 3rd grade and had a small number of neurotypical long-term friends from elementary school. Maia was teased by

some students on a regular basis, behavior she considered to be bullying. She reported these students to the office and their taunting paused for a time, but then it continued in certain classes.

The photographs Maia took highlighted several places in the school where she had access to food, which led to socializing with adults and peers. Other photos were of places where she interacted specifically with teachers and/or school staff. Several were places that she indicated she enjoyed being with specific friends. Many photos were of places she used to frequent but after some time she was asked not to come back, due to her struggles with emotional regulation when she was with those teachers or in those spaces. From the photos, it became evident that she had fostered relationships with many of the school personnel, even people she did not need to see on a regular basis. One of Maia's extracurricular activities, the Spectrum Club, was also discussed in the photos. Spectrum Club is an autism awareness club that she was invited to join, because she is autistic. The Spectrum Club meeting space was in the same room for autistic students who receive intensive services at school. Also, an Autism Awareness mural was painted outside this room. Maia liked this mural, indicating how it made her feel that the school understood autism.

4.6 The Social Skills Class

Maia completed her social skills instruction in a small group social skills group setting that met once a week for a half hour. The class was instructed by Ms. Reeves, an autism specialist, who had taught several of the students in a similar social skills group when they were in middle school. The group met in a small room with the 10 students in the class sitting around a large table during lessons. Maia spoke to the

general understanding that the students in the class are all autistic, saying how "Mrs. Reeves' class is for autistic people."

Ms. Reeves taught the group from her curricular toolbox and used a variety of social skills activities to individualize the content based on the needs of the students in the group. Maia enjoyed this class, stating she felt "It's pretty nice, I mean it's fun" and "one of the ways I can be in a group", which indicated that this group was a place of comfort for her. She said her relationship with Ms. Reeves was good and particularly liked that there was always an offering of snacks, one of her passions, at each class meeting.

4.7 How Does Maia Interpret and Make Use of the Social Skills Instruction She Receives?

4.7.1 The Specific Skills Learned and Used

One of the most memorable things about Maia was how much she loved talking. She was very aware of her tendency to talk more than the social situation required. For Maia, learning about "how to do conversations" was the most important social skill she learned at school. She consciously realized she was working on this skill and expressed how learning about conversations was valuable, "Conversations and social cues tell whether you're bored and stuff." She went on to describe that she also wanted to work on, "Having important adult conversations with my parents." Maia valued working on how to be better at conversation. She described how she initially learned about conversations in middle school and she continued to work on this skill over the years. Through using this skill regularly, she felt it was relevant to her daily life at home and at school.

Maia practiced social skills with other students and attributed her social ability as being "a fast learner." She talked about what it was like for her to learn social skills:

> See my learning skills, with social, are like me learning sheet music working in choir. I memorize it very quickly and then just don't need it anymore…Yea so I just take a few times to look over it and read it and sing it and then I just kinda put it away and I don't need it anymore. So, I learn that sheet music fast.

She thought learning social skills was a similar skill building exercise to learning music, as she had to first learn, then practice before the skill became part of her social repertoire. Maia also had a sense of pride in her ability to be a fast learner. She felt that she learned a skill and then was able to quickly incorporate it appropriately.

4.7.2 Social Skills Instruction

Ms. Reeves was Maia's social skills teacher for the prior and the current year. Maia anticipated continuing to work with Ms. Reeves throughout high school for social skills instruction. She expressed how Mrs. Reeves "was nice and still is" and how she enjoyed Ms. Reeves as a resource to go to for social support. Maia also frequently referenced Ms. Finch, her case manager from middle school, as another teacher who had influenced her and also taught her social skills. Ms. Finch kept in touch with Maia after the transition to high school. They had informal lunch get togethers at LHS every once in a while. After she came to high school Maia had a negative perspective on her new case manager, Ms. Hatch, who, in addition to Ms. Reeves, supported her social skills instruction:

> Generally, Ms. Hatch would be one of those people [to help with social skills], but I just don't get, just don't agree with what Ms. Hatch says… I think she tries [to help with social skills], I just don't agree with her.

Maia liked the methods Ms. Reeves used for teaching social skills. She mentioned learning social skills through direct instruction, led by Ms. Reeves, describing how "she talks, and I listen" as the primary method for teaching social skills. Ms. Reeves also applied several hands-on activities in the social skills group. In the following excerpt, Maia expanded on an activity that she enjoyed doing in social skills class. She attributed the activity to helping her learn how to have conversations:

> S: It's about learning social skills. The, actually just recently we've been making these cards. And we had 2 minutes to have a conversation with no side bars and no interrupting. And it worked.
>
> M: How was that for you to listen to someone without interrupting?
>
> S: It was fine, but I really wanted to talk.
>
> M: (Laughs)
>
> S: I'm like (makes sounds like): "weee ah ah ah ah ah" when people talking, I heard a pause and I was like "ah" And then they would start talking and I would just kinda kept quiet down.

Maia talked about seeking assistance from adults to work on having conversations. Specifically, she wanted them to help her with understanding how to read other people's cues when they heard her talk enough during conversations. She indicated discussion in her social skills group helped her with learning to ask others for help, as well as one on one assistance from Ms. Reeves.

In addition to learning practical social skills, Maia was given opportunities to use these activities to help her understand the social skills she would need to work toward as she ages. Maia was aware that learning and using social skills in her group setting occurred over many years, using information from the past and then looking toward her future. She described learning social skills while she was in middle school, and even discussed her first meeting with Ms. Reeves in elementary school, which she

considered one of the initial conversations about socializing. Also, some of the activities in her social skills group assisted Maia with learning to think introspectively about concerns she was having beyond school life. She discussed how it was important for her to talk about her concerns about life after high school.

4.7.3 Social Skills Instruction and Gender

Throughout Maia's experience learning social skills at school she was the only girl in her middle school group, and at the time she was the only girl in her grade in her social skills group with Ms. Reeves. There was one other young woman in her current social skills group, Raven, who was a senior and several years older than her. Maia thought of Raven as shy. I observed that Raven was very reserved and not as talkative as Maia. She did not contribute regularly or consistently participate in the class activities and discussions.

Aside from these understandings about being the only girl in these contexts, Maia did not view this negatively. She was on good terms with most of the boys in the class and one of them became her boyfriend later in the school year. In our follow-up conversation the next school year, she said they were no longer together, but were still friends. Maia was comfortable approaching many of the peers in the group and considered them her friends during school. She was friendly with the other students in her social skills class and felt comfortable participating in activities with them.

When asked about how she felt if there was an opportunity to take a social skills class with only girls, Maia stated her interest in talking about things relevant to only girls and women. For Maia, taking a social skills class with only other girls and young women students would be important to her in order to speak candidly about female body changes:

> I think it would be pretty awesome, because then you can talk about things that you can't do around boys…When you're with boys you can't talk about the girl-woman change, but when you're just girls you can talk about those things.

Maia admitted that she did not talk about the physical changes related to puberty with her female friends. She expressed some discomfort with how her body was changing and that she would like to talk about it with others. Maia's desire for talking to more girls and young women in the class resided in better understanding the female body and wanting some commiseration around that issue.

4.8 What Other School-Based Experiences Contribute to Maia's Perspective on Learning and Using Social Skills?

4.8.1 Friendship

Maia's time at LHS was very social and impacted by her friendships at school. Several friends were new to her since starting high school, while others were older long-term friendships. She had autistic friends in her social skills group, neurotypical friends, and friends with other disabilities. Maia's friendships allowed her to be social in varied ways. Friendship was a means for social and academic support during lunch and her classes. She had friendships with neurotypical peers who understood autism. Maia also knew about characteristics of friendships and valued maintaining long-term friendships.

She acknowledged her friendships resided only at the school for the most part. Some of them were old relationships, while others were with new friends she met in high school. Outside of school when she played a game online, she had some casual friendships with people from all over the world. However, these were considered to be more like acquaintances, because they only played that game together.

At the follow up interview, which occurred in October of her 10th grade year, Maia had a friendship update. She had become friends with a new girl who moved into her neighborhood. They met at the bus stop and saw each other regularly both inside and outside of school often going to the library together. Before this friend, she admitted she never went to a friend's house after school, mostly because she was usually grounded. Due to living in a small community, there was a high chance of running into a friend when she was out and about in stores and restaurants, but these were always meet ups that occurred by chance.

Maia and I discussed her friends in the social skills group. The boys in her group and Raven were most of the other autistic students she knew in her school. She sat with them at lunch and talked about board games, an area of interest for the boys in the group:

> I like to talk about what they like. They like to talk about Dungeons and Dragons. Not Raven. She's more of the quiet, shy, type. But then Trent, and Kevin, and Lincoln, they're all Dungeons and Dragons folk. They like to talk about Dungeons and Dragons and Pathfinder. They're big gamers…Yea, they're technically the card and board game type.

While she engaged in talking about their gaming interest, she did not talk much about the kinds of games she enjoyed playing:

> S: What I really like to talk about is, what I really like to play is games where you don't die and you have plenty of lives. … And it's not hard. I like game, I actually don't, I do like games like Minecraft, I like games by Hasboro like Ponyland, Birdland, Birdland paradise, Dinoland. Those games. … I also like, oh I also like more games like Minecraft, like Savannah Craft, Winter Craft … and Multi Craft.
>
> M: Do the other kids like those games too?
>
> S: I don't know I haven't really asked.
>
> M: The other autistic friends

S: I haven't really asked.

Maia had situated herself to have conversations with her autistic male peers on topics they were exclusively interested in talking about, but she did not discuss her similar interests. Some of the games she liked were feminine markers of her female gender with her interest games like Ponyland and Birdland. Rather, she tended toward keeping those conversations on the traditionally male topic of Dungeons and Dragons, which she had not played. Maia did not see this as problematic and said she enjoyed taking part in these conversations.

Maia had long-term friendships with other girls who were her neurotypical peers. She considered them to be her best friends. She valued their understanding that she's autistic. Maia detailed how she knew these friends, describing the social skills groups they were in together in middle school, which was one way for her to figure out if her friends were autistic:

> S: Yes, I do actually. I have some friends who aren't autistic…. And then there's Ryan, and Mary who's also in that group, who's also in there, but they're not in my [high school social skills] group, so they're probably not autistic. But they are good friends. Then there's Emma. I've known her for years. Years. And, and, Julie. And Beth and Lisa…They're all freshmen.
>
> M: And you feel like they understand autism?
>
> S: Yea. And they're not at, they never, ever get angry with me. And I and they all kind of get along together…We kinda laugh and joke, just like normal friends would.

Maia also talked of her new relationships since starting high school. She indicated the diversity of her friends as important to her. Her friends were girls, boys, older and younger, as well as friendships with peers who have disabilities.

When we talked about making new friends at school, she noted this occurred with much ease. She seemed to loosely define a friend as anyone who she could

approach and talk with on a regular basis. It was important to Maia to be a good friend. She tried to use characteristics of being a good friend, like kindness, with a new student with a disability who was in the special education track at her school, "I was the one that first showed him kindness, he was new, and I was the one that first became his first friend. I was the one that first showed him kindness here. He's a super senior actually, 20."

Maia was a talkative and friendly teenager. Having friends at school was a meaningful aspect to her school day, where she could socialize in many ways. She was aware that she was not friends with everyone and realized when a friendship connection was made with someone. It was important to her to foster friendships with many different kinds of people. Maia valued having a diverse group of friends to interact with on a daily basis and school was an ideal setting for her to work on these relationships.

4.8.2 Male Peers

Although Maia had many female and male friends, she mentioned several notable characteristics about the young men in her classes. Additionally, she spoke to how she engaged in friendships with the boys at her school. She was unhappy with boys who were loud and disruptive to her academic learning. Maia was a long-term victim of teasing by a small group of boys in her grade. She had a male friend with a disability and an upperclassmen autistic student she had met initially in a group outside of school then realized they both went to LHS.

Maia spoke about her perspectives on the male peers she interacted with on a daily basis. She described the small group of boys in her grade who teased her about taking drugs on a regular basis when they passed each other in the hallways.

Conversely, Maia also noted there were some boys who demonstrated redeeming qualities like being "nice" and "quiet" at school. She has autistic male friends from her social skills group who she identified as being a positive male presence in her school life:

> S: Most of the time boys are super annoying, but some, there are a select few that are actually quite kind and quiet and really nice.
>
> M: And are they in the group class with you?
>
> S: A couple of them yea, there's a few. My friends, most of them are boys in the group, except for one is a girl, like Raven, but then the other friends are boys and they're all serious gamers.

Maia discussed how one of the boys was a good friend of hers, because they both identified as having a disability, which created a trusting bond between them:

> S: I had a friend who's like me, but not exactly? His name's Mike. He's one of my good friends. He's kinda got a disability, but not autism…But Mike. We're good friends. We sit together at lunch every day. We used to be in PE together…And we aren't anymore, but, he, but he says that I'm the number one person he can trust. I like that.
>
> M: And he's not in Ms. Reeve's group, so he probably doesn't have autism, right?
>
> S: He doesn't have autism. Just, he has a disability, but not aut, I don't really know what he has really.

Throughout the interviews Maia mentioned she had a boyfriend. He was a student she knew from her social skills group in middle school. He was a year younger than her and still in middle school, so they did not see each other daily at LHS. She was able to see him on the bus and after school whenever there was band practice. They engaged in some casual affection, "Every time he sees me, he gives me a hug." In between interviews they broke up. She described her hurt feelings about him and the break up, saying, "He broke up with me and then eventually just ended. He just

wanted to be my friend…But he hurt me so much that I just kind of took him out of my life completely."

During our last discussion, Maia talked about how she had started going out with another boy from her current high school social skills group. They often ate together during lunch with one of his friends. Several of the photos Maia took were of places around the school where the three of them hung out at during lunch time, these included the locker area and the field outside. At the follow up interview, Maia described that they had also stopped dating, but the break up was okay, and they were still friends.

To Maia, male peers had many social purposes in her school life. Several of her male peers were also autistic and from the same social skills group, but Maia also had connections with other male students in her school. She enjoyed friendships with boys who were not too loud and where she could talk with them about things that were of interest to both of them.

4.8.3 School Socialization

Maia had consistent social interactions with adults and students in the school building. Her friendly disposition fostered social opportunities with her teachers and other school staff. Even when she did not like her teacher, as was the case with Ms. Hatch, she continued with social interactions, albeit stressful. Maia did not see the relevance of some of the social tasks Ms. Hatch asked her to do in lunch and the resource class and often advocated for herself otherwise. On the other hand, Maia enjoyed chatting with her favorite teachers who taught her favorite classes. Maia also completed group work assignments in her classes. At times, she struggled with that kind of social interaction with other students. These kinds of interactions created

opportunities for her to socialize academically on a regular basis with her teachers and with other students.

Ms. Hatch and Maia had a strained relationship, which led to stressful social interactions. Maia felt that Ms. Hatch nagged her to do her work. She described how they bickered back and forth about one of her social goals:

> S: The fact that Ms. Hatch she pushes me too hard. I feel like that…It's, she said it's part of my goals, to sit with someone every day and I don't really want to sit with people sometimes. I feel like it's alright to just sit alone sometimes like when you're having a bad day or something you just want to sit alone.
>
> M: Does she let you sit alone? When you want to?
>
> S: No.
>
> M: And, could you?
>
> S: I sit with a friend nowadays, everyday.

Maia expressed "I wish that I didn't have to take Resource." Explaining, "I don't want that class. I want it to be gone!" Her dislike for the class stemmed from her negative social interactions with Ms. Hatch. Additionally, these experiences were connected to her feelings on how Ms. Hatch treated her:

> Um the problem with the not sitting alone thing, how she, how you know she treats me and how she haggers on me on things like, like work when I'm like a little bit behind, she starts like, it makes me feel like she's kind of like, going too hard on me, like.

Maia felt restricted by Ms. Hatch and when she tried to advocate for herself, she felt like her concerns were not heard by this teacher. This strained relationship resulted in stressful and frustrating social interactions on a daily basis. In our interview, Ms. Hatch described a pattern she noticed with some of her students, who would resist her suggestions when they entered high school in 9th grade. As they

matured and the relationship had time to cultivate, they would achieve a better understanding of each other. At the follow up interview, Maia said her relationship with Ms. Hatch was better and that she did not mind being in the Resource class as much as she did the last year. They were able to resolve the main issues she was having in the class, which allowed for some repair of what had been a strained relationship.

Maia liked to talk with her favorite teachers. This socializing was reinforced by those teachers, which made her feel understood and respected. Her description of the projects and assignments completed for these teachers indicated her enjoyment learning the content in these classes. She was proud of the work she had done and understood that when assignments were catered to her passions the classes were much more enjoyable for her. When Maia was enthusiastic about assignments, she became more content and wanted to talk more with the teacher. Maia's enthusiasm for the assignments was affected by her preference for the teacher, which was indicated by her willingness to chat with the teacher.

Maia described how she felt about Mr. Crestal, her LA teacher, "I get along with Mr. Crestal really well…He's actually quite nice to me and he actually quite understands me." She went on to articulate what she liked about him, "Well he's actually quite a good teacher, he never yells at us, he never gets angry, very patient." By highlighting what Mr. Crestal does to support her in the class, by being understanding and patient, she responded to these traits and viewed him as a good teacher. Additionally, Maia highly enjoyed the activities they were assigned, as she was often allowed to use her creative passions in his class. This contrasted with Maia's

social studies teacher, who she felt was very strict, formal, and yelled a lot, which resulted in Maia disliking that teacher.

Maia socialized regularly with other teachers and school staff. She spoke about seeking out the counselor not for herself, but out of support for another student who she overheard talking about a medical issue that Maia felt the counselor should know about. In another instance, Maia talked to the school psychologist about their medical issue. Again, Maia related her interaction to being kind, "Yea…Because I'm a kind person…And when people hurt themselves it's like hey how are you doing? How's your [issue]? Something like that…That's basically me." Maia considered herself to be a kind person and took to this type of socializing as a way to engage in kindness.

With another girl in Ms. Hatch's resource class, she described how she appreciated having someone to work with academically after feeling like she did not have much companionship in that class:

> I had a sort of friend in that class, she helps me out when I'm in trou, when I'm confused…She helps me when I go to the study center, to do quizzes and stuff. When the teacher was totally like, I'm done teaching you, cause they were all talking, Cassie and me we went to the study center to get help on our homework, because she didn't do the notes.

With this friend, Maia had the opportunity to practice academic socialization with someone in a class where she felt she did not have other students or the teacher to lean upon for assistance socially.

Another component to Maia's academic social time, was teacher mandated group work. Maia articulated that "It's all right. I don't really do well in it, but sometimes I do." It was important to her that her ideas were respected. She admitted it was difficult to listen to the ideas brought up by others in the group. In the follow up interview Maia felt working with friends was a more supportive way to engage in

group activities and she did not mind the activity as much, if she had friends in her group. In our conversations, Maia understood group work as a means towards and end; it was one way for a project to be completed. It was also important to her for her ideas to be heard and respected by her peers.

Maia's social engagements throughout the school day were reinforced by the teachers, school staff, and students she felt understood autism and helped her feel respected while she went about her school work. Going to school was usually enjoyable for Maia, as she liked learning and was motivated toward a long-term educational goal of going to college in order to pursue a Ph.D. as an ornithologist. Maia socialized with her teachers in varied ways, with the socialization success depending on the likability of the teacher. Maia discussed her awareness of how and why group activities were difficult for her and knew that being respected by her peers, usually with her friends, would lead to a successful group work experience. Her school day was impacted by her preference for activities, which then led to socializing with teachers or peers, as well as her interest in discussing her learning activities at school.

4.8.4 School-Based Activities

Maia was the most active participant in this study in terms of interest and engagement in her school community. She participated in choir, after school study hall, and was invited to the Spectrum Club, a school-based club to raise awareness about autism with the study body. While she was authentically interested in these activities, there was also social value for her participation in choir and the Spectrum Club. She did not talk much to others during the after-school study hall, as she was usually completing homework during that time.

Maia was in choir for several years, since she was in 5th grade. While choir was an elective she took for a grade in school, she also described the opportunities this activity offered for participation in adjudicated competitions in both high school and middle school. She was proud of their performance last year. Maia enjoyed choir because it gave her an opportunity to sing, which was a strength for her, as well as socialize with many kinds of people. Working together as a group to prepare for the competitions was something she enjoyed, "I'm always there ready to work, ready to learn, ready to sing" and "It's really fun, I just love the singing really." Maia expanded on the importance of being with different kinds of people to help her work on socializing and how choir was a site for socializing for her:

> S: And choir. Choir. Choir is a good. Choir there are people of all sorts of different background. Very, very, variety. Very variety.
>
> M: Yea, so it sounds like it's important to you that you are learning social skills with different types of people,
>
> S: Mm hmm (affirmative)
>
> M: Um, why is that?
>
> S: Well, I think that's the best way to learn it, because everybody's different. Very different and you get to learn about how different viewpoints, different ways of thinking, like different, like even skin tones and genders.
>
> M: Nice yea.
>
> S: They're all different. And social backgrounds.

Maia's involvement with the Spectrum Club occurred only at school. She felt special being invited to be a part of this club and enjoyed that this club was specifically made for participation with different kinds of students:

> So also, I'm a part of Spectrum club, helping people with autism awareness…it's actually something to do with helping autism awareness and raising difference, raising friendships in people that are with very different.

Maia described how the meetings for the Spectrum club occurred during lunch and the role it played in her understanding of differences and disability within the school:

> S: Well there is a very wide variety of people in that group. There're all helping the people that, that, that they're one of their main classrooms is the Spectrum club room, is because they have some issues, certain disabilities. Somebody like Aaron he can't speak, he doesn't know how to speak except for like noises, like, gr, like I (muffled) mind if I say something that sounds like his voice?
>
> M: It's up to you.
>
> S: I mean like an "ahh" kind of thing
>
> M: Uh huh, yea.
>
> S: And then he's, he knows how to make the B sound, but he also has a little bit of issues walking.
>
> M: So, do you think that the other kids who are not part of the club are learning?
>
> S: Maybe, not quite sure, I haven't really known anybody that, people make fun of people and then there's David who has a little bit of problem with speech, Rachel, who I don't remember I think she has Tourette's or something. But, they're all very different and we help take care of them.
>
> M: And then are there kids who don't have any kind of difference who are also part of the club?
>
> S: Yes. They're, I'm actually, I think, one of the only ones who actually has autism as part of the Spectrum club.

Maia stressed the importance of being a kind person and viewed herself as helping the other students. While she acknowledged herself as one of the people in the club who has autism, she understood the other students in the club needed support and she

applied her perception of herself as a kind person to meaningfully participate in this club.

During the photo elicitation interview, Maia took several photos of the Spectrum Club classroom, highlighting the various signs of autism awareness in that room, like puzzle piece ribbon magnets. Outside of that classroom was a colorful mural depicting autism awareness symbols. Maia felt like this mural helped her fit into her school, saying, “I like it” and expressed, “People should know more about it, so people won’t tease them all the time.” Maia interpreted the symbols on the wall as raising awareness of autism in her school.

Maia’s participation in both choir and the Spectrum Club provided her with the opportunity to interact with different kinds of people. She enjoyed this aspect of her participation in these activities in order to socialize with different kinds of students, which was an important part of socializing for her. Maia realized diversity in her relationships were made from all kinds of identity markers as well as the effects of disability on the lives of other students in her school. She knew that the other students were vulnerable due to their disabilities and enjoyed her participation in Spectrum club in order to engage in a supportive friendship role in her school.

4.9 How Does the Ongoing Work of Learning Social Skills at School, via Instruction or Otherwise, Contribute to Maia’s Perspectives on the Development of an Autistic Identity?

4.9.1 The Impact of Autistic Traits on School

Specific autistic traits relating to passions, sensory sensations, hyperlexia, and ability to focus creatively all impacted Maia’s school experience. Food intersected as a sensory sensation that was also one of her most beloved passions. She was musically

talented, enjoyed singing and could match pitch. Maia had an autistic sensory stimming mannerism, which she called a tic, that we discussed at length. She considered herself to have "high intellect and creativity", as a manifestation of autism that intersected with hyperlexia, the ability to process letters quickly. She also expressed herself through talking, a lot, to other people. These autistic traits worked together to impact her social experiences at school.

Maia's passion for food permeated into most parts of her school and social life. In her photographs she identified several spaces around the school that she felt were important to her socially, because they were sites including food, like the free food bowl in the office, the vending machines, and the microwave in the cafeteria. While waiting in line for the vending machines or the microwave she would occasionally chat with the other students. In the following excerpt, Maia indicated that her use of the vending machines dictated her enjoyment of the school space. She also described her frustration with using the vending machines:

> mmm (pause). The fact that I never have enough [money], the fact that I never have enough to get one of those things (motions toward the vending machines nearby)…And the fact that this machine's not working…and that food machine I tried to put a dollar in today, I had a dollar with me from home, and it, it, it took it, but then it brought out a dollar coin and it wouldn't let me get it. The, the coin machine's jammed. That part...I was really mad about that. I wanted to get a Cascade Ice.

We discussed if she viewed her food passion as an autistic trait. At the time, she had concluded that it was partly due to autism, but also due to her medications. Maia admitted that her food needs were due to both hunger and desire for food. At times during our interviews, Maia abruptly changed the subject to talk about food or drinks rather than to stay on the topic. Food and drink were constantly on her mind.

Maia liked her social skills group with Ms. Reeves. Her sole issue with the class after the transition to LHS was related to food. She spoke about when she was in the middle school class, she liked that there were "better snacks," describing "sometimes there were donuts, sometimes you had parties. Like with delicious stuff." She felt that this year at LHS was very different, articulating the specific foods that were offered, "This year all I've gotten, every time we've met, no party or anything, just the choice between skittles, smarties, fruit snacks, or cheese and crackers or go pops." and lamented that they were "the same every time. Every single time." The only suggestion she had for Ms. Reeves to make the class better was alerting her that she "need[ed] better snacks." Maia's reference to these foods indicated the importance access to food choices was to her and her overall enjoyment of the class.

Maia's food passion was problematic in middle school. In that school setting, she viewed her passion as a deficit, because it was handled by the school as a behavioral problem. She received disciplinary referral for taking food she thought was free for anyone to have. Maia discussed the misunderstanding and how she perceived food as a problem for her at school:

> S: I had a problem and I still have a problem with food. I, there was a free food cart there, I'm like dude it's a free food cart I can get stuff from the free food cart it's for anybody. My parents seemed to think it was for people who were poor…it was for anybody. And I just, I took a pudding from that cart, cause, like, hey! It's free pudding, nobody wanted it. I love pudding…And then I got in trouble for that and then I got it taken away and then I took it back, because I was like hey! It's mine, and then I got in trouble for that…It was supposed, it was supposedly theft, but it was…but it was free, they should have said free.
>
> M: and um, how did it make you feel?
>
> S: I was very mad, come on it's a free food cart. It's free reign!

Maia stated she loved singing several times throughout our interviews. She had a musical talent to match pitch and talked about how she regarded herself as a fast sheet music reader and could remember songs soon after she learned them. Matching pitch and reading music quickly were autistic traits that helped her feel successful in this class, which also provided her with rich opportunities for socializing. In choir class she could interact with many different kinds of people as well as opportunities to go on trips with the class outside of school. At the follow up interview, however, Maia had decided to take a break from choir. She opted instead to try an art elective, which supported her other passions for creative crafting projects.

Maia identified strongly as a creative and intelligent person and felt the two traits intersected often. These traits were often applied successfully to her school assignments. She attributed these traits to being autistic. During the third interview, Maia brought in a notebook filled out cover-to-cover with drawings she made of birds to share with me. She had copied them from a bird book and drawn the birds during her free time at home with colored pencils. As I flipped through the book, she excitedly regaled me with facts about the birds on each page. Maia described how autism impacted her ability to be creative with crafts and drawing, saying," I have to say it's the impacting, the impacts they are actually good impacts. They make it the creativity better. I love to create crafts." Maia understood her creativity as a manifestation of her autistic neurology. She articulated her understanding of how her brain was more creative and how she applied that creativity to an assignment in school:

> S: Well. The brain, when my brain, you know there's the left side of the brain, the right side of the, brain the hemispheres?...Left side of the brain's all about work and logical things…Right side of the brain's all about creativity and stuff…In my brain my autistic makes it so that my

right side of the brain is always dominated over the left side...So, I'm more prone to using the right side of my brain rather than the left side of my brain

M: Got it. And, does that impact the intellect part too?

S: Hm. In fact, my right, the right side of my brain has gotten me extra credit in school before.

M: Oh cool.

S: In 8th grade, I did all these extra credit projects, especially for the reasons for seasons in 8th grade you had to cut and paste earths on a piece of paper. I made a 3-dimensional model…With earth on one side…With the equinoxes and the seas and solstices…Um and there was an accidental tilt. I'm like I didn't want that tilt there. And then I showed it to Mr. Smith, he's like dude that tilt make it an excellent ellipse. It was an accident, but it worked! He still has it hung up in a corner near his black board.

Maia had an autistic stimulation, or stimming, mannerism, which she called a tic. She engaged in a series of physical body movements when she became excited. Throughout our interviews I noticed she would start to twitch and then she would stop herself. We talked about how she was controlling her tic after I made those observations of her behavior:

S: I get excited, when I see something exciting, I start to twitch!

M: laughs. And um, do you have a name for that when you twitch?

S: Um, I call it a tic.

M: A tic.

S: T-I-C

M: OK. And um, do you

S: Or a spasm. It's either a tic or a spasm.

M: OK. And ah, do you try to control that or anything or like?

S: I try, because every time I do. I get excited and then I do that and I just kinda try to grab my hands to keep them still.

M: Why do you do that?

S: Cause it seems, cause I get. Cause usually when I'm at home. I'm at home and then I start to do this, I kind of grab my hands cause every time my dad says "You look really excited. You look like you're about to fly out through the roof!"

Maia expanded on her description of what her body does when she was excited and started to twitch. Her body moved similarly to a bird taking flight:

S: Basically it's (pause). I get really excited about something and I start doing this, and then I start jumping up and down out of my seat like I'm about to fly.

M: You literally just looked like a bird! (laughs)That's so cool.

S: That's basically what people are likening it to it at home. (smiling)…I start looking like I'm about to shoot up through the ceiling.

M: What Maia just did is she kind of, you didn't extend your arms you kinda bent them at a 90-degree angle and then you wiggled your fingers, right?

S: Yea.

M: And then, do you move your arms up and down, I guess your forearms up and down

S: I kinda do this

M: So, your whole body kinda moves.

S: Yea kinda like and I kinda just step in.

M: Jumps, yea steps in and jumps.

S: Step in and wiggle.

M: And jumps and wiggle is that accurate and you move your fingers at the same time?

S: mmhmm (affirmative)

M: OK and, um, how do you feel when you're doing that?

S: I feel really excited. I don't even notice it most of the time. I just know when people tell me I do that.

Maia's tic behavior impacted her school experience socially, as she would attempt to stop engaging in her tic whenever she became excited and others noticed. This was one way that she stood out as being different from the other students. While Maia delighted in showing and telling me about her tic, she also felt that it was a piece of her autistic self that she wanted to try to hide throughout the day. She was aware that it made her look different from the other students and also made her vulnerable to teasing or bullying by other students at school. When she was at home, she felt more comfortable and waited until she was home to demonstrate her excitement with her tic.

Maia was a talker. This wonderful trait was evident from the first moment we met. She spoke about how she enjoyed talking and could not help herself but to talk all the time. When she was with her preferred teachers, she felt comfortable talking to them, and knew that they understood her need to talk. Her desire to engage in better conversations as a social skill stemmed from her "constant talking" and she wanted to stop interrupting others. She also wanted to be more aware of when she ended up taking over the conversation, realizing that her conversational partner would soon become bored. She understood her talking was an autistic trait, that it supported her attitude and interest in socializing, but it came at a cost to her relationships with her family. Maia described her feelings about talking so much:

> But. I'm mostly social. I'm like, I'm more, one of the things I like, another thing I like about autism is my attitude. I'm usually happy and really energetic. And I love to talk. Even though that's another thing I don't like. The talking I don't like that also. Because my parents get really mad and then they…tell me to please be quiet over and over

> again and I'm quiet for just a little bit, but I have to keep going. I have to say this, I have to say this, and then all of a sudden, just shut up. And then I get sent to my room.

Food, music, intellect and creativity, tic, and talking, are all aspects of Maia's autistic experience that were highlighted during her school day. These autistic traits influenced her socialization with others, as they were vehicles for her to either work on a social skill, or as with her tic, an understanding that it was an autistic trait that was so different she felt the need to hide it from people at school. She actively worked toward using these traits to her benefit and realized how being autistic was useful toward her academic success and social skills.

4.9.2 The Masking Impulse

Maia detailed how she hid facets of her autistic self while at school. This impulse to mask being autistic stemmed from her desire to fit in with other students so that she could be like them as much as possible. This focus on normality was crucial for her, due to past and present experiences with bullying, which were formative in her understanding of how she was perceived by other children. This need to survive through hiding autism and appearing like the students was a conscious decision for Maia.

Maia conceptualized hiding autism symbolically through her description of wearing armor. She articulated how the armor was a way of understanding her awareness of how different she was from the other students:

> It basically means I'm different. Very different. Even though high functioning autism. I'm, nobody can tell I'm autistic. Unless. You were talking about the chink in the armor comes out. Then people know I'm not quite neurotypical… So. But I'm mostly normal, but also, my, ah, high functioning autism gives me a higher intellect than most of the people, most people my age. I also have big plans for myself, but, it's a lot harder for me in behavior-wise. And to control my impulses. So, I

> need to work harder on that…That's all I need to do is work harder and things will get better.

Maia discussed perceiving herself as wearing a mask. This concept was taught to her in her social skills group and she uses it to understand that she has an autistic identity, however she chooses to keep her autism to herself:

> Something we talked about in group was the Japanese, they have this, like, belief about 3 masks. One is a mask you show to your really close friends and nobody else. One is a mask you show to the rest of the world. And one is the one you keep to yourself. Deep in yourself. So, in my case, might only have about 2 masks. One is the one I show my friends how normal I am. And the other one is my autistic one, I keep to myself. But sometimes my, it's a lot, I can't keep the second mask to myself and it comes out. In a form of a tic or, a, yelp or something like that.

Maia detailed why it was important to her to wear the armor in order to feel like she is not judged or perceived differently, as a means of safety for herself to protect herself from the bullying of other students:

> S: I feel like people don't judge me as often [with the mask on]. I'm not exactly thought of as a freak or a weirdo. It's happened before. I've been bullied from second to fourth grade I've been bullied…Every second of my life.
>
> M: I was going to say what do you think would happen if you didn't have that on?
>
> S: Then what happened. Bullying. Teasing. Picking on me. You know those bullies that did that? They're the reason why I started hating *Dora* at that age. Because every time I came to the bus stop they're like [singing example]. Every time I tried to stop them […] Every time I tried to stop. They wouldn't listen.

When she was younger, Maia felt that the adults were not understanding of her, which resulted in disciplinary action by the school:

> Back when I was a little kid, like kindergarten through fourth grade. I had a very hard time keeping my mask on. I was bullied. Teased. And got a lot of referrals. Especially in fourth grade. I got referrals in fourth

> grade just for no reason at all. Just for breathing basically. I did not like that teacher.

Maia's masking behavior was a means to an end for her. She had a history of being bullied, which resulted in feeling stigmatized for being herself. It was important for her to feel like she was acting like the other students, who she thought of as normal. However, she also had to take off the mask when she felt like she needed to be herself, to show her "true face." Taking off the mask often happened at home where she felt comfortable.

For Maia wearing the mask or armor was a longstanding component of her autistic identity. This was a piece of her that she had been working on since childhood. In her adolescence she planned to continue to incorporate it into her social repertoire. At the age of 14 she had worked on masking her true self and felt like wearing the mask was becoming a part of who she is and would plan to continue to use the mask.

With regard to socializing, Maia's mask wearing was a way for her to fit in with the other students. Bullying was a component to her daily life at school in the past and in the present. She had experienced teasing and offers to purchase drugs from a group of boys in her grade. After talking to the principal about these incidents, the boys stopped when they were in the hallway. However, Maia still experienced their bullying in a class that often had a substitute teacher. To Maia, the need to mask her autistic self was situated that school year in a need to survive socially at school. Also, Maia was a naturally friendly person, who enjoyed friendships and the company of other students. Socially, she wanted the other students to like her and wanted them to be friends with her.

4.9.3 Marking Autistic Identity

Maia had multiple identity markers and identified as both autistic and bipolar. She discussed being autistic in the context of comparing herself to the other students who were not autistic and understood herself as being different from the others. Maia had a conceptualization of autistic traits she identified with, which resulted in some behavioral difficulties in school. She felt that traits like being good at math and puzzles, and issues with social skills were traditional autistic traits. Maia attributed her creativity to using her right brain more than her left brain. Indeed, Maia was quite creative. She spoke of making up her own languages and constructing fantasy characters out of paper with moving parts. Maia was hyperlexic, a common condition in autistic people, where she could read very fast while comprehending the content. A frustrating aspect of autism for her included difficulty remembering names of places or things while recognizing the face of a person or the façade of an object. When needed, she memorized names of people and things she knew she would have to recognize.

The other autistic people Maia knew were the students in her group at school. She did not have any autistic adult mentors in her life. In our conversations about knowing autistic people, she noted that it would be beneficial to know autistic adults in order to talk about their experience, as well as to be a mentor to younger autistic people to show them what it had been like for her. Occasionally, she would talk at school with an autistic student who was not in her group. They first met at a youth group she used to attend and mentioned how it was hard to tell he was autistic.

Maia's discovery of being bipolar and autism were different experiences for her. She learned first about being bipolar when she was in elementary school. Maia had mixed stories about when she first learned she was autistic. Initially, she indicated

how she always knew, because adults discussed it in her presence and then she figured it out. Then she joked that her mom "dropped the bomb on me" before dinner one day and that was how she discovered she was autistic. After learning she was autistic, she proceeded to look up information about autism online and read books about autism. She was able to see "a lot of myself in those books," which helped her gain an understanding of her autistic identity.

Maia enjoyed reading *Thinking in Pictures* by Temple Grandin. That book assisted her with learning how to use some of the terminology associated with being autistic. She learned about the term neurotypical from autism books, but she was not familiar with the term neurodiversity. When we talked about neurodiversity, she determined what it meant by deconstructing the definitions through her understanding of neurotypical, concluding "They're like the people that aren't exactly, like, normal brained." She also realized that the books were not always accurate. When she mentioned completing a reflection journal in middle school, she referenced a book she had read about autism and interrogated the myth that autistic people cannot make friends, rejecting it, because she had friends. She realized that her autistic experience was different from what neurotypical people thought. From the books and her experiences, Maia understood that autistic people are different from each other.

Maia did not prefer person-first or identity-first language, but she wanted her name to be recognized. She demonstrated collapsing her identity into her masking impulse as she referred to herself as weird and placed a focus on identifying as being normal: "Hi my name is Maia, I'm autistic. I have these weird things that happen, but I'm mostly normal, just like you and all your friends."

Maia thought of herself as a person with high functioning autism. It was important to her that she did not look different, although she admitted having this label meant she was different. Her masking impulse was connected to her autistic identity in this way. By identifying as having a higher intellect than other people her age, she realized that she can appear "normal." However, she understood she would need to work on her behavior in order to realize the trajectory for herself after high school.

Maia felt that she had several issues related to her behavior, which were attributed to autism. She described, "My, my anger, my attitude. My unusual mood swings, my talking nonstop…And not listening, back talking, arguing" as examples of behaviors she was working on improving. These behaviors affected her relationships at home and school. She articulated these behavioral issues are "impacting relationships with my dad and my mom and my brothers. My family hates me. They want me to get emancipated." While Maia observed how autism affected her positively, she also thought of her mannerisms as behavioral issues to work on, which resulted from being autistic.

Maia's autistic identity markers stemmed from several sources. Her conceptualization of autism came from her own research either online or through reading books about autism and the occasional open-ended school assignment. Maia felt that she had positive traits attributed to being autistic, such as being creative and having a high intellect, and noticed how these traits provided her with motivation to continue on toward her long-term educational goals. At the forefront of her mind were behavioral struggles, which she understood as restricting her ability to move forward with her long-term goals. Maia's perception of autism was in contrast to understanding she was different from the other students. While she readily identified as autistic, and

disclosed it to people at school, it was important to her that she did not appear autistic in her behavior.

4.9.4 Autism at the Intersection of Gender

Maia identified and presented her gender as female. Her clothes and hairstyle were feminine in style. At our follow-up interview, she dug into her purse and offered me a variety of colorful and scented lotions to use. This act indicated a traditional feminine sociocultural social engagement with another person presenting as a woman.

Maia did not consider being a young woman to intersect with being autistic. She knew that she was often the only girl in her grade to be in her social skills group and had experienced being the only girl in that group when she was in middle school. However, her conceptualization about being female was in understanding the physical components, like getting pregnant, which she did not want to worry about someday:

> Sometimes I wish I was born a male though, because then I wouldn't have to, I wouldn't have the problem of accidently getting pregnant and things like that. Wouldn't have those problems, but then my mom told me some of the problems that guys have and I'm like I guess it's all right to be a female, but it would still be cool to be a male…But I'm not transgender.

In our conversations about autism, Maia did not indicate dissatisfaction with autism due to her gender. Rather, she identified as exhibiting specific behaviors, like her fixation on food or talking a lot, which she attributed to being autistic only. Maia viewed autism and gender as separate components of her identity.

4.10 Maia's Summary

Maia's social skills experiences occurred throughout her school day. She was taught social skills directly, having a positive experience in her weekly social skills

group with Ms. Reeves and the other students. Maia was social with people in her school, talking often with friends, classmates, school staff, and her teachers. Her socialization with her preferred teachers also impacted how she viewed these adults as understanding her, which made her feel comfortable with them. This was reinforced by these teachers supporting her creativity and passions in their assignments. Maia's descriptions of these assignments were another type of social skill in itself, with her excitement and enthusiasm for the teachers' application of her passions engaging her socially to talk at length about her academic successes. This was contrasted with her experience with her special education case manager, Ms. Hatch, with an array of negative reactions to their social relationship, including how Ms. Hatch taught social skills to her. She was not as enthusiastic in her description of Ms. Hatch or the resource room activities and did not provide as many details in her descriptions of that special education experience.

The social skills Maia learned at school were relevant and valuable to her. She had targeted specific skills to work on, like conversations, and consciously implemented the skills she learned into conversations with, her friends, family, and people at school. When she needed support with socializing, she felt comfortable reaching out to Ms. Reeves. Maia did not view her gender as impacting her social experiences, however she would have enjoyed knowing more autistic girls and women in order to better understand the physical changes associated with adolescence.

While identifying as an autistic person, Maia experienced a tension. Having completed her own research on autism she was aware of her autistic mannerisms and how these affected her social and academic life at school. She identified as an autistic person with high functioning autism. However, after experiencing bullying since

elementary school, Maia also understood the need to safely hide her autistic traits behind a mask, or armor. In addition to this tension, Maia's conceptualization of autism was situated in separating autistic people apart as not normal. While this did not prevent her from having autistic friends, she felt that she needed to try to act like she was not autistic while she was at school. Maia did not perceive gender as a salient aspect to her autistic experience, feeling that autism as an experience was separated from the experience of gender.

4.11 Ninja

4.12 Profile

Ninja was the second student recruited for this study. Her autism specialist put me in touch with her special education case manager, Ms. Armstrong, who was supportive of this study and spoke with the parent about Ninja's participation. Our introductory meeting occurred during the end of Ninja's annual IEP meeting, with Ms. Armstrong, the autism specialist, a school counselor, her parent, and Ninja in a conference room at the school. Ninja's parent was enthusiastic about her participation; however, Ninja was initially reluctant. She asked for some time to think it over to discuss her participation further with her family. After a few days she completed the consent form and gave it to Ms. Armstrong. We decided to meet at school during Ninja's study hall and social skills period, which was with Ms. Armstrong. Ninja had a smart phone, but she was working on keeping it away while she was at school. I communicated with Ninja over email, usually with her parent and Ms. Armstrong copied on our communications. During our interviews Ninja readily engaged with me, answering the questions with many details, occasionally expressing nervousness about

being recorded. I had a joint interview with Ms. Armstrong and the autism specialist, who collaborated often with each other on Ms. Armstrong's social skills class.

Mountaintop High School (MHS) was a traditional 4-year public high school located in a recently built very large school building in a suburban part of Oregon. The suburb is in an upper-middle class area that is considered to reside within a "good" school system that is well-funded with many extracurricular activities. The school ran on a semester block schedule for classes. A sizeable bank of windows on the second floor overlooked the school's track with a snow-topped mountain range in the background that could be seen on a clear day. Colorful student-made posters of athletic events and student groups adorned the hallways. Student artwork was prominently displayed on my walk to Ms. Armstrong's classroom located in a labyrinthine area of the school. Within the classroom were two separate rooms for the teachers' office and a sensory room. The first interview with Ninja took place in the office, with the second and third occurring in the sensory room.

Ninja was a 15-year-old sophomore at MHS. She enjoyed playing video games, editing videos, anime, and manga. When Ninja was in middle school, she moved to her current school district from a nearby district and then went through the diagnostic procedures to be labeled autistic. One of the areas she struggled with in school was needing more time to process information. Ninja felt that her teachers had an unrealistic expectation for her to quickly process their directions. Ninja had general understanding of the content within her IEP and knew that direct social skills instruction was in the document. She attended a social skills class with Ms. Armstrong every other day.

Ninja identified herself as one of the only autistic girls in her school and the only autistic girl in her social skills class. While Ninja identified as a girl, she also recognized she was a tomboy in style, often choosing to wear a T-shirt and jeans. She felt that the social skills instruction she was receiving was only somewhat beneficial, highlighting how her social needs were different than those of her male counterparts. Ms. Armstrong developed her lessons in an informal manner, based on the needs of the students, pulling from several social skills curricula sources. She used a variety of instructional techniques, including meditation and a Socratic method activity on a regular basis.

The classes Ninja attended were made up of students with and without IEPs. Media class, health, and employment class were classes she highlighted during our interviews. Ninja did not like working in small groups with a preference for individual work, because she felt that her peers did not listen to or value her ideas. In general, Ninja was uncertain about how the general education peers regarded her and it was extremely difficult for her to make friends at her school. She engaged in school jobs such as cleaning the school and assisting with making the school lunches in the cafeteria during her special education classes.

School-based friendships were elusive to Ninja, as she did not consider any of the other students in her school to be her friend. She had one other longtime autistic friend outside of school, however during the duration of this study they stopped talking to each other, which was upsetting to Ninja. She had other friends she hung out and texted with outside of school. When Ninja spoke of former boyfriends and the boys in her school her remarks were usually negative. Between the third and follow-up interviews Ninja got together with her boyfriend, who did not go to her school. Ninja's

friendships mostly resided online. She had a network of fellow online gamers she connected with remotely on a regular basis. At times, they disclosed their autism labels to each other. Her gamer community was usually made up of friendships with older male peers. She felt that she got along better with young men, then with boys her age.

Ninja took about 20 photos. She walked around the building with an iPad during her study hall period, then Ms. Armstrong assisted her with uploading the photos. The paraprofessional staff in Ms. Armstrong's room represented much of Ninja's social connection at school. She referred to the paraprofessionals often and took photos of many of them. Ninja's photos also highlighted memorable spaces where she enjoyed physical education and media class activities outside of the classroom, as well as spaces where she was viewed as a helper to other adults (e.g. the nurse's office, and cafeteria).

4.13 The Social Skills Class

Ninja's experience with direct social skills instruction occurred in a special education setting. She was in a social skills small group class with her special education case manager, Ms. Armstrong and about 10 other autistic students. They did not consistently meet all together for every class meeting. The room had a large classroom area, with several desks grouped together and oriented toward a white board, which had several daily notices colorfully written and displayed. There was an area of the room dedicated for the paraprofessionals' desks. Two additional rooms were located inside the classroom, an office and sensory room. It was acknowledged within the classroom that all of the students in the class were autistic, which explained why they were grouped together in the same class to learn social skills.

The class met every other day, with a study hall period on the off days in the same room with many of the same students. Ms. Armstrong used a variety of teaching and curricular materials for this class, often determining the course content based on the needs of the students. Additionally, students in this course went on field trips into the community on a regular basis to generalize the skills they learned in the class.

Ninja's experience learning social skills during her 10th grade year was often viewed negatively. She felt being the only girl in her social skills class was a disadvantage. While she admitted to learning some useful skills, she thought most of the social skills she learned were oriented toward her future after school. Ninja would have preferred to learn how to navigate socializing with her same-age peers. One of the aspects of the social skills class that she enjoyed were the opportunities to generalize socializing into the community through field trip opportunities. They went to area stores, restaurants, parks, and the occasional movie. Much of the socialization she was taught valued manners and being polite to others.

4.14 How Does Ninja Interpret and Make Use of the Social Skills Instruction She Receives?

4.14.1 The Specific Skills Learned and Used

Most of the social skills Ninja talked about learning were focused on formalizing her interactions with people. This included both in-person and online social skills. She talked about Ms. Armstrong teaching her to write emails with appropriate etiquette. Ninja acknowledged, "you kinda want to be, like, really polite, you don't want to be rude in the email "and that when emailing with different people, "especially if it's like a teacher, or a co-worker, a boss, um, you don't just want to say, hey you forgot this. You know, you're going to want to be polite about it." Before this

lesson Ninja had not realized how her written voice sounded when she wrote informal emails and wanted to make sure she was respectful to others during her email communications. In addition to Ninja's email example of online social skills I observed Ms. Armstrong's lesson and activity on memes, internet jokes written on a photo.

Many of the social skills Ninja learned were intersected as life skills. She liked the field trip component to her social skills class. When Ninja described learning about, "going to the store and… shopping on my own without a parent" she understood how there were additional social skills she would need to use in public spaces like stores in order to interact politely with people. These skills were useful to her future independence and led her to understanding about politely engaging with others, which would help prepare her for employment.

Ninja felt she was learning a lot about employment skills in her class with Ms. Armstrong, which was frustrating to her. Since she was not employed Ninja struggled to find the relevance in learning those skills. She preferred actively using and practicing the skills she was learning in class. Ninja had wanted to learn social skills, "…that's actually important to a teenager not to an adult. "

In particular, she wanted to learn more about social skills she could practice at school. She described, "I'm not really the biggest fan of the way we're taught, because I feel like there's not enough balance between adult life skills and student life skills." Ninja expressed she wanted to learn, "how to deal with, like, teenage situations, not just, like, adult situations." She felt that Ms. Armstrong's lessons "really only cater to, like, seniors. To people who are already adults." Ninja was disappointed that most of the social skills lessons were geared toward the older students. This made sense,

because over half of the students in her social skills class were in their junior or senior year of high school. In the follow up interview, Ninja was having a better time in the class, partly because Ms. Armstrong started incorporating more lessons she found relevant to her immediate social life at school.

4.14.2 Social Skills Instruction

Ninja's interpretation of the way social skills was presented to her included several pedagogical methods incorporated into the class by her teacher. She explained how Ms. Armstrong used a variety of teaching methods into their social skills instruction. One of the activities Ninja liked was a Socratic method:

> …you write down a bunch of questions you want to ask, or points you want to make, and then the next day the class will gather up into a circle of chairs and we'll all have a class discussion, we'll take turns speaking… And it can kinda be like a debate, I guess, over, like, ah, a discussion of what people think something is or maybe what something should be, whatever, whatever it is.

While she wasn't directly learning a specific skill with the use of this Socratic method activity, Ninja enjoyed learning indirectly how to engage in academic social skills like class discussions, debate, and taking turns speaking. Ninja also enjoyed field trips for social skills practice, acknowledging that she took many more field trips than most of the other students she knew who were not in the social skills class.

Ninja did not like many of the in-class activities she completed during social skills class. She described feeling that social skills had to be a useful activity and along with learning about social skills she wanted assistance with the actions that corresponded with the social skills:

> I mean it's supposed to be social skills, so like doing all these lessons in the form of packets doesn't help when it's like, I feel like learning social skills, like you, like, you can't just be told, like, how, how life

> works. You have to practice it, you have to practice social skills as well. Like ah, it's kinda, you know, on field trips actually… I feel like it's better if we have class discussions about it though, or maybe even role play a situation. I don't really like role play, I prefer a real situation, ah you know.

Some of her social skills instruction incorporated working on her emotional regulation through writing and learning about meditation. Ninja discussed two reasons why writing was not a useful activity for her when she experienced stress and anger: "…one, when I'm stressed, I can't really write, you know. And two… it just kinda makes me angrier, cause… it feels like I'm doing an assignment, you know? It feels like, it feels like a chore." She expanded that she would rather, "wait to talk to someone that can write it down… I don't feel like I'm able to properly convey my emotions when I write them down." Ninja understood someone might not be available for her to talk to, and she desired learning another type of emotional regulator than writing while waiting to talk with someone.

She described a web-based guided meditation activity. The website provided videos, which were intended to assist the consumer with learning about a meditative position and relaxing their mind. Ninja felt this was not a useful calming strategy for her, expressing it had the opposite effect, "I hate those because whenever I meditate it doesn't make me feel better it just makes me feel more restless, you know." For her, movement was a key component to feeling relaxed and she felt like the guided directions restricted her, "Like…when I can't move at all, when I can't even tap my feet, or you know, bounce my leg around…when I can't fidget anything I get anxious," Ninja realized, "the best way to burn off stress for me is to move around or, like, just do something you know?" She had expressed her discomfort to her teachers and was told to stick with the meditative videos even though, "…meditating makes [stress] worse…I've been doing this for like a year and it just makes me feel more

anxious every time I do it." Ninja disliked these strategies and thought they were not effective for her emotional regulation. In the follow up interview she updated that she was not required to complete the guided meditation every time, but it was still encouraged that she attempt the activity.

Ninja was aware of the usefulness of the social skills lessons to her daily life. She understood the social skills she was learning needed to be generalized to all of her daily activities. When she completed worksheets or role plays, which she felt were not generalizable, she did not enjoy learning social skills. Additionally, the social skills class was a place for her to work on emotional regulation as a social skill. However, she did not enjoy the methods prescribed for her. In her follow up interview, the teacher was working with her on other regulation strategies, such as checking in and talking through any issues at the start of the school day.

4.14.3 Social Skills Instruction and Gender

Ninja's experience learning social skills was influenced by the instructional methods and content, but she also felt singled out as the only girl in the social skills class. Ninja identified a variety of reasons why she felt this way, describing the class as a "sausage party" and acknowledged her adverseness to the male dominance in that class. During my in-class observation Ninja engaged in a partner activity with one of the boys. Throughout the activity he did not pause in his talking. Ninja repeatedly asked him if she could speak, gradually raising her voice with each repetition of the phrase. While this was a single observation, it was congruent with Ninja's description of her experiences in that classroom.

Despite her acknowledgement as the only girl, Ninja did not attribute gender itself as part of the problem with her dissatisfaction of that class. She did not feel

social skills instruction needed to be catered to exclusively to girls or women. To Ninja, social skills was a practical matter. The boys in her class simply required different skills than she did. She articulated her understanding of how "the guys…just have different problems than me" and she observed how "they don't know how to socialize that well, it's a problem," while acknowledging "I know how to talk to people, and I'm not saying this is just an exclusive to guy thing, this could apply to anybody, I'm saying maybe they have a higher degree of autism than I do, you know?" In these statements she delineated how the different social skills work the boys in her class were undergoing was a facet of autism, not at an intersection of autism and gender.

Ninja made several observations of her male peers' socialization behavior in school and how that was related to autism:

> Because it seems like all the people in here seem to have a higher degree of autism than I do, I feel like they, they're just not really, I've see how they act in their classes, they're really not good with their interactions, another reason why I can't really get along with them is because they're kinda rude…I, I know how to talk to people at least like, you know, I know the basics. I know how to interact with the teacher. It's more like just starting friendships is a problem for me, or like making friends is a problem for me, because ah, it's just, hard to tell if it's my fault, or if I just need, or if I've just met the wrong people.

While Ninja realized the boys in her class required different social skills strategies than she does, she attributed this to autism, not to gender. She also realized that her own social needs were separate from what they boys needed. Gender was not the reason for their different social skills needs. Ninja thought that the social skills she needed to make friends were more sophisticated than the boys' social skill work toward having conversations. Indicating how people experience autism in higher and

lower degrees, her male peers showing more autistic social behavior than she does and thus required more social support.

In addition to realizing they had different social needs, Ninja felt disrespected by the boys and young men in the social skills class. She clarified why she struggled with maintaining relationships with those peers:

> Well I can't really get along with any of them, cause they aren't very nice to me…Feel like everyone in my class just preaches positivity to have a really, a really over positive look on the world. It's like they can't accept that not everything's happy and rainbows. And it's true, I tend to have a more neutral view on the world It's not too pessimistic, not too optimistic. It's like, it's like I'll be positive about things that are positive. I look at the positives, but I also look at the negatives as well and I realize, you know ah, there's some, there's also some not great things going on, you know?

At the follow up interview the next school year, more girls were taking the social skills class. Ninja said she felt more comfortable, because she was no longer the only girl. She was encouraged, seeming to take on an informal role as a peer mentor to the female students, acknowledging that it was still early in the semester and the new students were adjusting to the class as they were getting to know each other.

4.15 What Other School-Based Experiences Contribute to Ninja's Perspective on Learning and Using Social Skills?

4.15.1 Friendship

Ninja did not consider any of the students in her school to be her friend. She had deeply pondered this, viewed it as problematic, and spoke eloquently about her struggle with making friends at her school. Outside of school, Ninja had an online friendship circle made up of majority male friends who were a few years older than her. These friends were located all over the world. She played video games with them

and keep in touch using *Discord*, a social media app designed for online gamers. They talked using a voice call feature, as well as typing messages to each other. At the follow-up interview she revealed that she had a few long-term male friends outside of school, who she had kept in touch with since before her move into the new school district a few years ago. Also, she had a new boyfriend who was around the same age as her. He did not attend her school.

Ninja met her former long-time autistic best friend, who was another girl, when they were both placed in a "friendship" group in elementary school. They attended different high schools but had maintained a strong friendship. This best friend was the only other autistic girl Ninja knew. Ninja and the friend had recently stopped their friendship after they had an argument. When she mentioned the loss of this close relationship, she said she was depressed about the situation.

At school Ninja struggled with making friends. She had a strong desire for them, but was uncertain about her interactions with the other students at her school. Ninja and I discussed her perception that "most of the people that are friends don't really like me that much." She felt aware that the other students were different toward her:

> …well they seem to be kind of awkward around me, I guess. Or they, ah, hard to explain, but um (pause), they can be kind of aggressive towards me. And um, (sighs), they (pause), they just don't really seem to appreciate my presence I guess, you know…Um, and like I said a lot of my friends are like study buddies to me. Like I don't really hang out with them outside of class.

As she was discussing this, her voice inflection, along with pausing and sighs indicated she was feeling some emotion with her realization about how the other students acted toward her. Ninja discussed that her definition of a friend was

"someone who actually bothers to talk to me and hang out with me." Ninja wanted to work on social skills that would result in more friends at school. She was confused about the socializing needed to start a friendship and wondered if she needed to do more work on her end to be more engaging at socializing or if the other students could do more to be more social:

> …it's more like just starting friendships is a problem for me, or like making friends is a problem for me, because ah, it's just, hard to tell if it's my fault, or if I just need, of if I've just met the wrong people.

Ninja also had perceived that some of the students did not like her, "because I'm kind of antisocial, they just think I'm weird…they think I'm an awkward person." She noted that she did not get along with many of the other students in her school, acknowledging her distaste for their behavior, saying, "they're kinda perverted."

Ninja described her social issues with initially meeting and getting to know other students, indicating that she was uncertain if there was a reciprocation in liking each other. She felt "there's some students that I kinda like, but I can kinda tell that they probably don't like me" and realized it was "a little tough making friends" at MHS. Ninja wanted to be social, but also realized, "I'm not really the most social person, not because I don't want to be. I'm just not very good at it." She experienced stress when she would talk to people and then found herself "not knowing what to say." She had narrowed down that she could communicate with others if they were working together, however initiating other kinds of conversations were difficult for her to do in person. She felt "…when it comes to creating personal relationships, I'm way better at doing that, like, online…Where I'm not, don't actually have to talk."

Ninja understood the need for friendship and the role of companionship in her life. She had several friendships she had cultivated outside of school and online. Ninja

valued her friendships and close attachments with peers as well as young adults a few years older than her. She knew what she wanted from someone she considered to be a friend. Her friends had to understand her social differences and to be patient with her if she did not follow certain social dynamics, like joking around. Ninja understood herself to be perceived as being different by her peers at school and admitted she was not very social in person and that this was a struggle for her to reach out and make new friends. Rather, she preferred to engage in interpersonal relationships online. Ninja had a history of liking other kids at her school, and then after getting to know them being let down that they are not the same person she thought they were. This pattern resulted in Ninja's decision to give up on the project of making friends at her school. Instead, she wanted to focus on her studies rather than continue to figure out what was going wrong with her interactions with the other students.

4.15.2 Male Peers

Ninja's friendships with other boys and young men were a source of struggle, but also her main source of friendship. She realized that most of the activities she enjoyed, like video games and anime, were considered to be gendered male-centric items. Thus, Nina was positioned as one of the only girls interested in things that were of interest to boys. Most of Ninja's friends outside of school were male and older that her, because they played video games together and hung out online. Ninja did not enjoy the company of other 15-year-old male peers at her school. We discussed her experience the previous year with a boyfriend from her school, which was a relationship that ended poorly.

One of Ninja's passions was watching anime. She realized the peer group at her school who also enjoyed anime was mostly boys. When she tried to talk to them about anime, she had concluded there were some differences in their affinity:

> Well, like I said, (breathes in), um whenever I meet someone that's like an anime fan, they usually turn out to be kind of um, ah, I don't want to swear, but, they turn out to be kind of an asshole I guess…Like, that and a lot of guys at this school who are anime fans, and I feel like most anime fans at this school that I've met are guys, they really only watch anime for, for like perverted purposes…They like anime because they think the characters are hot, you know…And I guess that can be standard for a lot of people, but I like anime for the story and the characters and the art, you know…Even the soundtrack stuff to me, that's kinda a lot more important, you know…Like, that's why I like anime, but a lot of people at my school like anime because the girls are hot, you know, they've got big eyes.

Ninja did not prefer the company of boys her age, instead she opted to be with young men who were older. She thought boys her age tended to be "perverted" and "mean", which she did not experience with older male peers who she considered more mature.

Furthermore, Ninja had negative experiences with dating. She described dating two boys, one who went to her school and another she knew outside of school:

> I actually dated a guy at this school at one point, like when I was a freshman, like first week of school. And um, he was really pervy, inappropriate toward me, if you catch my drift…And um, and eventually he cheated on me, so that wasn't good. And ever since then I've been really careful with who I date, I've only had 2 relationships...My second relationship was someone who doesn't go to this school, but they were a close friend of mine. They dumped me, I don't really know why.

She came away from these dating experiences exercising caution about who she would date. Also, some confusion around why she was dumped. At the follow up meeting, Ninja happily shared she had been dating a young man who was slightly

older than her and they had a lot in common. She met him through another male friend she had outside of school and they were not attending the same high school.

Ninja's experiences with boys at her school was mostly negative and she was disaffected with this peer group. The male peers at her school largely appeared to talk with her about topics she found unseemly, despite having similar interests. In addition to her peers who were not autistic, she also regularly talked with (or was talked over) the autistic boys in her social skills class, who she did not get along with enough to consider them to be her friends. When Ninja attempted to talk with boys about something they have in common, like anime, she soon realized that they enjoyed it for different reasons. After a year and a half attending MHS she understood that while she liked a lot of the same things that boys usually liked, the interactions with many of her male peers at school was unacceptable and she did not seek out their friendships. Ninja's dissatisfaction with the male peers at her school was balanced through her online friendships outside of school.

4.15.3 School Socialization

Ninja felt that she was in classes with other students who were usually loud and disruptive. She thought many of the students in her general education classes required support with emotional regulation. Ninja tended to keep to herself when put in a situation where she was disrupted, and sometimes asked to go to the sensory room in Ms. Anderson's room suite, for privacy. Some teachers allowed her to go to the sensory room regularly, others wanted her to stay in the classroom.

She also had issues with finding appropriate times to go to the restroom, because the passing time between classes was not enough for her to use the restroom and make it to class on time. Ninja spoke of asking a teacher to use the restroom after

she had arrived on time to her class. The teacher asked Ninja to wait five minutes until she had finished introducing the day's activities. Ninja waited for much longer than five minutes and became increasingly uncomfortable. Realizing the interaction did not result in what she would have preferred, because "it's really hard to concentrate when you have to go to the bathroom, so would have been better off just going to the bathroom than asking her, you know, like what am I going to miss?" She ended up disliking these restrictions and felt that the teacher's "attitude kinda hurts me."

She identified the employment class as another place for learning social skills related to getting a job. Additionally, her health and math teachers organized their instruction with built-in opportunities for socializing with other students. Ninja talked about interacting with the other students in the media and physical education classes. She identified the classes that provided ample social time usually had lot of different kinds of group work opportunities and students had some down time to talk to each other. She liked having the time to talk to her peers and often took advantage of it in those classes. Lunch was another place she talked to other students or adults. She ate in different spots in the school depending on her mood.

During the study hall period Ninja often used any extra time to do jobs around the school, usually in the cafeteria. She occasionally talked with some of the cafeteria staff or other students while assisting with meal preparation or toweling off the cafeteria tables. Ninja noted that she did not always take this time to talk with others, especially if they were new to the jobs. She wanted to be mindful that they might not want to talk in order to focus on their work. By the next school year Ninja was no longer engaging in these jobs, as found the work to be tedious.

Ninja would retreat to the social skills room area, usually the sensory room, during down time like lunch. When she brought money, Ninja liked to go down to the cafeteria to purchase food. She took a photo of the tables in a large cafeteria area and talked about difficulty with finding other students to eat with in the cafeteria as well as trying to avoid bumping into two students she did not like. Ninja often ate lunch in the social skills room out of convenience. She kept her lunch box in that room and when she went there to retrieve it, she would end up staying, either hanging out with the other students in the room or eating by herself. At the follow up meeting, Ninja said she had started to join a lunch bunch group. This was a group of students from all over the school, usually others who had a hard time finding peers to hang out with during lunch, that met during lunch time and was facilitated by a teacher. Ninja reported that she was enjoying the time to talk with other students and appreciated the opportunity to participate in this group.

Ninja felt that she had a good relationship with both her employment class and health teachers which were classes she felt were additional spaces for learning social skills. Employment class was her favorite class where it made sense to her to learn social skills related to work like interviewing for a job and how to act while working. She jovially stated, "…my teacher Mr. Bradley teaches us how we're supposed to act at work or, like, what it takes for us to, like, you know, be able to have us like survive in a job (laughs)." Ninja identified the employment class teacher, Mr. Bradley, as one of her favorite teachers. Employment class was open to all students in her school, unlike the social skills class. Ninja felt that the skills she learned with Mr. Bradley were relevant to her life in order to go through the interviewing process for employment and with on-the-job socialization. She also learned new skills that she did

not know about before. Ninja discussed her revelations on contacting an employer after a job interview, where she had not realized, "You're actually supposed to call them, you're not supposed to wait for them to call you, because they're not going to call you…like, I learned that. That's very important if you want to get a job."

In addition to the skills she was learning, Ninja liked Mr. Bradley's personality. She described him as a fun teacher who allowed the students to talk with each other when they were finished with their work. Ninja took a photo of Mr. Bradley in a humorous pose, displaying his gregarious attitude. When we reviewed the photo, she described him as, "…a great guy. He's really funny." She felt that the class discussions were interesting and appreciated that he allowed up to two weeks to turn in a packet of work. Ninja expressed, "I feel like his class is really fun to discuss work things and learn more about work… I learned some things I would never have thought about, you know, if it weren't for him."

Ninja liked her math teacher. She thought he was "a great teacher," describing him as "really cool" and "chill." Ninja appreciated he was "not really strict and he makes a lot of jokes…and tries to have fun." Also, she enjoyed doing *Kahoot* activities on Fridays (*Kahoot* is a website for teachers to personalize whole group quizzes and questionnaires). She was unsure if he was a special education math teacher and noted that there were many other students with IEPs in the class with her, as well as the math they were learning being easy to learn with calculators. The math teacher promoted socialization in class. Ninja stated, "he's not always telling us to be quiet. He lets us socialize as long as you're working ", which Ninja made use of in down time. She also noted: "I don't like when…teachers who just tell us to be quiet

the whole time…usually if I'm done with my work… and I'm sitting next to someone that I know I like then I'll try to talk to them."

Editing videos was one of Ninja's passions. She was taking a media class where she often worked in groups and had the opportunity to edit videos with the group. Some of the photos were locations her media class group used for assignments. This class was unique in that they were allowed to roam around the school in order to take the videos needed for their assignments. The photos depicted fond memories of specific assignments for that class. However, she often dreaded going to this class, because of issues she had while working with the other students.

Ninja did not enjoy group work, although she understood it to be a component of socializing in school. She was frustrated when the other students either did not take the work seriously, or they did not respect her views on how the assignment should be completed. She took her school work seriously and did not view group work time as an opportunity to hang out or goof off.

In her media class, she described her issues with working in groups of students. Despite her affinity for video editing, she did not feel respected by the other kids in her groups. She described, "usually [the group members are] either just not nice or they always slack off and you know…And we don't get all the footage we need, like, when we're out filming." Ninja discussed an issue with one of the male students in the media class. She asked to be removed from the group since she did not feel comfortable working with this student. Ninja described the incident:

> … like I said they can be kind of mean. Like one kid, has no, knows nothing about me. He just randomly…called me a bitch…And that frustrated the hell out of me, and so I, so I told the teacher, because I'm not trying to sound oversensitive, but I don't really want to work with someone that's just gonna say mean things to me like that. Like, it's a

> school project, I'm supposed to get this done, I want my grade to be good, but why should I work with someone if they're either not going to do their share of work, or if, or if they're not gonna, you know, be nice to me?

After the incident Ninja was moved from the group and completed the remainder of the project on her own, which was her preference.

Ninja's response to working with the disrespectful students was met with anticipation that she would inevitably face that sort of behavior in the workplace, "And the sad part is that I'm going to have to deal with [disrespectful behavior] when I get like a real job, and I'm not, I'm not going to be able to do anything about it." Although she successfully advocated for herself concerning this issue with the student in her media class, she became despondent and had resigned herself to expecting disrespectful interactions as a reality for her when she was working. She was concerned that she would be without the safety of a teacher to support her at work if she made assertions about others' inappropriate work behavior.

Interactions with the teacher assistants (TA) were important to Ninja and made up a large part of her school day. She had one-on-one TA support in many of her classes. Ninja took photos of TA's that she worked with throughout her day, because she enjoyed working with them and found she could talk about things she has in common with many of them, or they were helpful to her in their support. Having a TA to support her in school was a new accommodation since she entered into special education in the 8th grade. She enjoyed talking with them and identified how teacher assistants supported her socially. At school, where she identified herself as mostly antisocial, the discussions with her teacher assistants about common interests, like anime, or Japanese culture, were a welcome change for her. Ninja felt that the TA's who were able to support her the most academically were the ones who knew how to

step in and did not hover over her. Although she got along with them, she also realized that she wanted to be able to complete her school work independently. Often, the substitute TA's were problematic for her, because they provided too much support.

4.15.4 School-Based Activities

Ninja did not participate in the array of clubs and activities her school provided. One barrier for Ninja attending after school activities was transportation home from her school after hours. She did not think her mom would support having her take the club bus home from school, expressing that her "mom will get worried." Ninja had some initial interest in the anime club, however, in connection with her issues with her male peers, she soon realized that it would not provide her with the kind of peer support she was looking for, saying "Well there is an anime club at school, but a lot of the anime fans, well they don't really like anime for the same reasons I do".

4.16 How Does the Ongoing work of Learning Social Skills at School, via Instruction or Otherwise, Contribute to Ninja's Perspective on the Development of an Autistic Identity?

4.16.1 The Impact of Autistic Traits on School

Ninja's school day was impacted by her sensory sensitivities. School disruptions were a constant source of sensory stimulation for her, which resulted in sensory dysregulation. She experienced a "sensitive head" where she had a very sensitive sense of sound and touching her hair was painful. In order to reduce the amount of hair brushing she would have to do in the morning before school her hair was kept shoulder length as she could not stand to take care of long hair. Ninja liked to appear groomed when she went to school every day and made sure that she came to

school with her hair neatly brushed, even though it was a painful experience for her to do this every morning.

Sound sensitivity impacted her school day on many fronts. Ninja was constantly being interrupted by loud sound stimulus. There were daily announcements, which included music and were sometimes read in more than one language. The harshness of the classroom noises made it difficult to concentrate, especially when the other students around her were talking. She preferred to go back to the sensory room in order to concentrate without the extra sound stimulus in the background. Ninja explained her preference for the sensory room, "I can just do the work, I don't have to deal with people trying to distract me, or people making a lot of noise, because I have sensitive ears:"

Ninja's main passion was video gaming, which she was socially engaged in after school. During school she could not incorporate her passion for video games into her assignments. She found she was usually one of the only teenage girls who had an interest in video games, which positioned her as an outsider and it was difficult for her to make other female friends who were also as passionate about video games. Ninja attributed her knack for video games to being autistic:

> Pretty much every game I play I'm pretty slow and strategic. Because I feel like it's the best. Probably tedious method, but probably the best way to beat the game…Since, I'm autistic. I'm not a very quick thinker. So, it's kinda molded me into like a slow and strategic player.

Ninja also had a passion for editing videos, which she enjoyed doing on her own when she had a working computer. She took a media class in school, but much of her enjoyment for video editing was sullied in that class, due to the large amount of group work requirements. Ninja would have liked working with students who also enjoyed editing videos, but she felt that the other students did not take the class as

seriously as she did. Socially, this was problematic, as she wanted to be more focused on completing the assignments than the other students in her group.

Another passion of Ninja's was Anime. There was a school-based opportunity to interact with other students who liked Anime through the Anime club. Ninja soon discovered that her passion for Anime, which was in appreciation for the artistic elements involved in the production of the Anime shows and films she enjoyed, was not the same as the other kids in her school. This impacted her attempt at socializing with peers, who sexualized the experience of watching Anime. Outside of that club, Ninja sometimes talked about Anime with an older student she did not see very often, or she talked about it with her TA's. While it appeared that she could have leveraged this passion for Anime into meeting other students with a similar interest and make friends, this was not able to be fostered at her school.

While Ninja had things in common with the other students, she was often positioned as an outsider in relation to these common interests. Ninja was specific in her tastes and how she enjoyed her passions. She acutely understood how this impacted relationships with the other students. This lack of sharing her interests was a problem only in her school life, as she was able to find common ground on her passions and interests with her friends who did not go to her school.

4.16.2 The Masking Impulse

Ninja did not feel a need to mask her autistic self at school. This resulted in much difficulty for her in fostering authentic friendships, as she perceived herself to be antisocial and different from the other students. At the same time, while Ninja identified as autistic and had awareness of what it meant to be autistic, she did not disclose being autistic to students outside of the social skills classroom. A tension

developed for Ninja's peer relationships at school. She felt secure in being autistic, however, Ninja also understood the discomfort with the interactions with her peers stemmed from their lack of understanding about autism paired with her autistic social mannerisms. She had a history of being bullied, which was related to her autistic traits.

When we talked about middle school, Ninja expressed her discouragement with her teachers and what it was like to be bullied:

> I'm not going to lie, [middle school was] pretty bad, because a lot of the kids straight up bullied me. Like it wasn't just a matter of, oh they don't, I can probably tell they don't want to be around, it's like they straight up bullied me, because of my tastes in video games and stuff like that. There were some pretty dumb things. And that I couldn't do anything about it and none of my teachers really did anything about it. I even told them, they're like oh well we'll try to talk to them, but they never did anything. It really bothered me.

Additionally, Ninja did not want to tell the other students she was autistic. The "special ed. kids" were the only ones who knew about her autism label. Ninja expanded on disclosure to her friends online:

> The only people I've told [I'm autistic] to are a few friends of mine on *Discord* server. Um, because I trust them enough and like, um, and they don't really care that I'm autistic. They're ok with it you know. Like they say, like they even said, you make autism look cool.

While Ninja did not hide being autistic, she also felt a need to trust others with disclosure of being autistic. Ninja understood herself to be set apart from the other students in her school and having no friendships at school, along with a history of bullying, she had not developed a trusting bond with her peers. It was important to her that her friends understood her autistic traits, such as needed extra processing time when they talk to her, or why she might need them to explain a joke to her. Instead, she opted to disclose and discuss being autistic openly with her friends online. Several of these friends were also autistic. She also preferred socializing online than in person.

These facets of her relationships with those friends supported building trust with them, so that she felt comfortable disclosing being autistic to them.

4.16.3 Marking Autistic Identity

Ninja offered what being autistic meant to her, discussed how specific autistic traits affected relationships, and spoke to realizing how autism affected interactions with others. She was in the process of understanding how autism was an important part of her identity. The autism labeling and diagnostic procedures had only recently occurred when she was in middle school. After she was labeled with autism, Ninja was placed in special education classes with TA's for the first time. Ninja talked about her preference to use the term autistic, as well as her overall understanding of what it meant to her to be autistic. Additionally, Ninja's autistic identity connected to her concept of relationships and understanding that relations with autistic people were different than with people who are not autistic.

Ninja felt there was no difference in the person first or identity first terms used for expressing autistic identity. She felt, "just as long as you don't use something like the r word "and that "they're all scientific terms really", which indicated that the autism labels did not have a negative connotation to her, like the R word[1], but was regarded as something scientific rather than an identity marker. A revealing component to Ninja's understanding of how she was viewed as an autistic person, was her perception that she was treated like a child. Ninja required more auditory processing time, which many people misunderstood as a disabling aspect of being

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[1] The "R word" is in reference to the word *Retarded*, which is often used in a derogatory way to imply someone has less intelligence or decreased functioning level.

autistic. However, for Ninja, she did not perceive it this way at all, rather she found it another facet of who she was, which was only disabling when others viewed it that way.

Ninja described how she was infantilized by adults. Her negative perception about being autistic was connected to her concern about differences in expectations other had for her versus expectations she had for herself. She did not like "people thinking I can't do this, because they think I'm not developed enough or whatever." Ninja also expressed feeling that Ms. Armstrong was not understanding Ninja's need for extra time to process before acting on a direction Ninja described how she felt babied by others who viewed autism as disabling. She talked about her perspective of autism as situated in levels of autism severity and indicated autism can be disabling for some people and not disabling for others:

> I don't particularly, I don't particularly like being autistic that much, because it makes certain people baby me. A lot. Because they think they need to baby me. (pause). And I get it, they want, they, they don't want to be too hard on someone who has a disability, but I don't consider autism a disability. Depend on, well in my case I don't consider it a disability. I mean different like, different like, different levels of autism maybe it can be, maybe it can cause some like, some kind of, ah, disability, but really depends on like the level of it. Um, spectrum. (pause) But, usually, I don't think it's a disability.

Although she identified as autistic, Ninja struggled with understanding what it meant to her. She initially talked about it from a neurodevelopmental perspective, "it means you were born with a different, with a different kind of brain, I guess. I don't know." Ninja then clarified how being autistic was in relationship to sensory sensitivities like her own, expressing, "I noticed that maybe autistic people tend to have sensitive ears. Um, I think they also tend to take a little longer to process things."

She also admitted that she was "not necessarily an autism expert" and knew that "autistic people develop differently than people without autism."

She realized when she was with her friends that she required extra time to process information when they talked to her, which was a manifestation of autism. It was important to her that her friends understood how she experienced being different, because she was autistic:

> I guess in my case like since I'm autistic I would want them to give me, like, some time before I, like, process something that they tell me or process like a question, cause ah, I think this is an autistic thing, but I tend to need to ah, ah you know, I tend to need time to process something.

Ninja understood how being autistic impacted her relationships with others. While she did not have friendships in school, it was useful to see how her understanding of her relationships with her friends outside of school intersected with how she viewed the impact of autism on those relationships. With her online friends, the majority of their conversations consisted of their similar interests in video games and anime. However, she enjoyed commiserating about autism with her autistic friends online. They were positive about autism and she felt comfortable discussing being autistic with them. Ninja spoke to the value of having autistic friends, saying "If we both have autism, we both understand each other fine, you know."

Ninja had been exposed to some autism books from her parents. These were mostly resource-based books that were intended to help the audience learn more about autism, rather than being exposed to autism from the perspective of an autistic person. She was unfamiliar with autistic self-advocates, like Temple Grandin. The book *Flowers for Algernon* was impactful for her to understand what it was like to have a disability and she enjoyed that it was a story told in first person. Ninja had learned

about autism after talking with her autistic friends and from her own online research. She had conceptualized the difference between autism awareness and autism acceptance and expressed that some autism organizations “treat autism like it’s a problem.” Ninja did not look for autistic characters in TV or video games and was unfamiliar with neurodiversity.

The discussion about autism in Ms. Armstrong’s class that stood out to Ninja was about the difference sensory needs for autistic people. They made “these little things where that would help us with our sensory things.” She realized that “Ms. Armstrong talks more about like, social skills than autism itself.” and expressed that she wanted more discussion about autism, saying that she would “like it if [Ms. Armstrong] talked more about autism, so I could know more about it.”

While Ninja identified with being autistic, she also had not been exposed to many of the concepts or resources that would support her in learning about autism, particularly from the perspectives of autistic people. Aside from her older autistic friends online, where their relationship was based on their similar interest in video gaming, she did not have any autistic mentors in her life. Ninja conceptualized being autistic mostly as a negative part of her life. It was a stretch for her to find positives about being autistic.

4.16.4 Autism at the Intersection of Gender

Ninja identified as a tomboy, usually wearing a t-shirt and jeans at our meetings. At the follow-up meeting she talked about noticing she did not traditionally present her female gender but mentioned she would occasionally get dressed up in a more feminine manner if she was going out with her boyfriend. It was important to her, however, that her boyfriend like her for who she is, which was not traditionally

feminine. We also talked a little bit about body image, how she sometimes worries about her weight, and noticed that was a common discussion topic among her female peers. She wanted to have a positive body image and did not like participating in those kinds of conversations.

Ninja identified as, and related to, the experience of being a woman. She felt that there was not much of an intersection between being a woman and autistic. Ninja admitted that she did not know many autistic girls or women and was curious to talk to more autistic people who identified as female in order to learn more about autism:

> Well. I've heard that autistic women, like myself, tend to be kind of shy. You know. Or they might be a bit irritable…Kind of like me…considering the fact that I don't really understand, like the difference between autistic women and autistic men quite yet. Like I guess ah. Not sure. I just, I just know. I'm not an expert, you know. I'm just going based off of what I've seen. You know…But you know, I think. I don't think these things are exclusive to women though. I think ah, I think autistic guys might be shy or antisocial, or they might be really irritable, like me.

While she clarified what she meant about autism and the specific traits she felt she may have in common with other autistic women, she restated that autism may not be demarcated specifically by gender, but by the autistic traits of each individual. Without knowing other autistic girls or women, her understanding of how autism and gender intersect was based on her own experiences in the male dominated autistic spaces she knew.

4.17 Ninja's Summary

Ninja's experience learning social skills at school was highlighted by her discontent in her social skills class with Ms. Armstrong and by her lack of authentic friendships at her school. She felt that the skills she was learning in her employment

and social skills classes were not directly relevant to her social needs at the time. Although Ninja knew she would someday have use for the work experience skills in the workplace, her experience learning social skills with Mr. Bradley was more enjoyable than in the social skills class, partly due to his engaging teaching style. She was not as pleased with Ms. Armstrong and struggled to find relevance with the skills being taught in her class. Most of her social skills applied to her life in the workplace or her life as an adult. This was frustrating to Ninja, as she had identified she needed more support to make friends at her school.

Ninja made many attempts to get to know the other students at her school who had similar interests, however she was consistently disappointed in how her peers engaged with these interests. Ninja's interests aligned with male students, who she found to be unseemly in their discussions on shared interests. She did not have longtime friendships at her school to lean on, because she had recently moved to the school district. Ninja did not perceive the school to provide many supports toward development of friendships. Despite this, she appreciated her teachers who allowed for extra social time and she tried talking to other students during down time in her classes.

While she identified as autistic, Ninja also realized that she had not learned or researched much about autism. She had some conversations about being autistic and autism with friends outside of school. At school, the autism discussions were about social skills and occasionally sensory issues. Ninja expressed that she did not know that much about autism, stating some uncertainty about her understanding about autism, and that she would like to know more about how being an autistic girl is different from being an autistic boy. She was careful to have an equitable assessment

of autism, considering that autism did not necessarily require a gendered difference. At the same time, Ninja felt that there was something to be learned about autism from other autistic girls or women. She experienced a dearth of both, not knowing any autistic mentors who identified as women or role models and understood that it would be helpful for her to know more autistic people like herself.

4.18 Ernie

4.19 Profile

Ernie was the third student recruited for this study. Her referral came from the suggestion of a teacher acquaintance to reach out to a small charter school that is known for serving a large population of neurodivergent students. After emailing school personnel about the study, Ernie's enrichment teacher connected me with Ernie and her parent via email. I met with Ernie and her mom at Ernie's school after school hours to discuss the study. We agreed that texting would be the best way for all of us to communicate when to meet. Ernie's family moved to Oregon from across the country the year before in order for Ernie to attend this specific school. She was previously enrolled in an online school program and did not interact with any peers in person. Both the parent and Ernie were very enthusiastic about Ernie's participation in the study. Ernie's enthusiasm was evident in our interviews, with her use of humor and she often altered her voice to mimic the people she was referring to when we talked.

Ernie was a 15-year-old sophomore who started attending Evergreen Charter School (ECS) a year prior to her participation in this study. She enjoyed drawing and video games. A 504 plan was in place for Ernie to receive accommodations as needed

for her autism label. Ernie was aware of her 504 plan, but she did not know the details or which teacher was responsible for the document. Ernie identified as an autistic person and disclosed that her mother and brother were also autistic. She had completed some online research to learn more about autism, as well as casual talks with her mom about it. Her teachers considered her and another male student at her school to be autistic advocates.

ECS is a unique K-12 democratic charter school in an urban location. The school is physically small, with the high school consisting of less than 100 students total. A block class semester schedule was in place with a half-day Friday schedule. There was eclectic artwork prominently hanging in the school and a mural featuring historical social justice leaders of color on one of the school's outside walls. The school was close to public transportation and situated in an area with shops and restaurants within walking distance. For the high school students with permission, there was an open campus policy. Students often walked beyond the school grounds during lunch or for other activities. To promote inclusiveness of students representing the gender spectrum, the secondary school section of the building had gender neutral bathrooms.

Ernie felt the school ascribed to a politically left leaning ideology. This became evident during my observation, while students joked with the teacher about his Marxist positionality, as well as their self-initiated cardboard sign construction for the March for Our Lives protest[2] in one of their classes. I interviewed Ernie's

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[2] The March for Our Lives was a nationwide protest movement initiated by high school students after the deaths of 17 students and staff during a shooting inside Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL on February 14, 2018. They

group/history teacher and her enrichment/science teacher, because they were the teachers who directly instructed and worked with Ernie on embedded social skills instruction.

The friendships Ernie made at school were valuable to her and she felt that the democratic model of the school promoted her ability to make friends when she was new to the school last year. She had about 4-5 close friends, who were not autistic, and she saw them regularly outside of school. Ernie was the only autistic young woman in her school, despite many of the male students having an autism label, and the other students having other neurodivergent labels, like ADHD, anxiety, or depression, along with a large transgender and queer population, as stated to me by Ernie and her teachers. Ernie disclosed she was a lesbian and preferred the company of women to men in her friendships. Additionally, Ernie did not present initially as a young woman, she purposefully dressed and styled her hair as someone who may be read as male.

Ernie took one photo of an outside public park area located next to the school. With her electronic tablet she drew herself and her friends into the photo. When she explained the photo to me, she went into detail about how she drew each friend to indicate their personality. In Ernie's depiction of herself, she was happy, with her arms up and screaming. Screaming and yelling was an autistic mannerism that Ernie periodically engaged in, and her friends accepted this part of her personality. Ernie

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were protesting the gun lobby and want to change gun laws to be more restrictive in the United States.

recounted fond memories of lunch time and other down time at school in that spot in the park with her friends.

The democratic philosophy of this school made it notable for Ernie, and this study. Student agency and choice were highly valued by the adults and students at ECS. Along with state mandated academic courses, students attended a weekly enrichment class as well as a weekly group class, led by different teachers. During these classes students were sometimes engaged in direct social skills instruction, which was dependent on the needs of the students and the school. At other times, the students asked their teachers for support in academic and social skills. Ernie and her teachers expressed that students must self-advocate in order to have a successful schooling experience at ECS.

Each year at ECS Ernie worked on a public service project for her group class. This project became more robust and community-based through their high school years. The year we had our interviews, Ernie planned to institute a comment box for the students to anonymously provide the staff with feedback. The school's extracurricular program was small and Ernie did not take advantage of what was offered. However, she engaged in other social opportunities through the school, such as volunteering to be the school tour guide during the annual Open House night for prospective families.

4.20 The Social Skills Class

Ernie attended a nontraditional public charter school with a democratic school philosophy. ECS attracted other autistic students, as well as students with ADHD, anxiety, and depression. Due to this alternative educational setting, she was placed in a context with neurodivergent students around her at all times. Additionally, there was a

large queer and transgender student population at this high school. Ernie's social skills learning was impacted by these opportunities to interact with a diverse group of students.

One of the philosophical components at ECS was a focus on fostering relationships between the students and teachers. The school had a longstanding culture of teachers investing in relationships with the students. Ernie talked informally with her teachers daily, because the relationships with the school community were fostered. Stanley and Sarah applied formal direct instruction for social skills lessons, along with embedded instruction, noticing whenever the need arose for Ernie to talk about socialization. Ernie also discussed her position as the only autistic young woman in the high school and how that impacted her social skills.

Ernie's social skills instruction occurred during two classes all students were required to undergo at her school, group and enrichment. Group was a grade-level class specifically focused on the planning and completion of a large-scale project by the end of the school year. Enrichment was an advising period the students had every other day with one of their teachers who was also given enrichment responsibilities to a caseload of students that spanned all four high school grades.

Stanley was Ernie's group teacher. They met twice a week in Stanley's room, with Stanley providing some direct instruction on a social skill, such as leadership, that would assist the students with success in their project. Otherwise, this class was an independent study, with the students determining ideas for their project and checking in with the teacher, which Ernie considered an important way to learn how to apply social skills. The teacher often positively reminded the students when they were using one of the skills they learned in the class.

Ernie's enrichment teacher was Sarah, who was also her science teacher. Enrichment took place in Sarah's' classroom. Ernie equated the enrichment classes to the Hogwarts houses in Harry Potter. During this class, they often met in a circle and reflected on prompts the teacher provided. At times, the prompts were interesting (e.g. if you could be a plant, what kind would you be?) and at other times they asked the students to ponder their feelings (e.g. how is your week going?). Then the students discussed their responses. The role of the enrichment teacher was influential in how Ernie learned social skills. She took initiative to seek out Sarah for a variety of issues related to her requests for academic support in her other classes, and in how to work with the other teachers on advocating for herself.

4.21 How Does Ernie Interpret and Make Use of the Social Skills Instruction She Receives?

4.21.1 Specific Skills Learned and Used

Due to her school's alternative setting, social skills were embedded into the culture of the school. There was an expectation that students asked questions and advocated for themselves if they needed support from their teachers. Ernie explained that this was an integral aspect to being at this school and received encouragement from other students as well as teachers:

> I think it's like the teachers, but also the students talk about it. So, if you complain about it, oh I can't go to the person, they're like you gotta, or else nothing's gonna get done. So, it's like an overall reminder. Stamped on your forehead… I think it was, like, pretty helpful, especially, like, the experience of actually doing it and then learning, like, they weren't kidding at all. It was nice. So, like, pretty good. Had a good time.

Using the metaphor of riding in a car on a bumpy road, Ernie described her experience learning a new social skill:

> (pause) [Learning social skills is] Hard. Cause it's, like, you didn't really, like, see it in a certain way and now you do and, like, oh! That impacts people. So, it. But nice, like, when you get better results from, like, peers and stuff. So, kinda like a nice little traveling right? Have a nice car, a nice road. Sometimes it's a little bumpy you kinda get lost a lot of time, but that's ok, soon you get to your destination. It's like that's cool and then you get in the car again and go to the same place, except for you got to go back and then you got to come back like a circle.

Ernie's description provided some understanding on the feeling of being lost while learning to use a new social skill and then once applying the skill, there was a continued need for feedback. In her school setting, which was supportive of students with different socialization styles, Ernie took advantage of practicing new social skills that she had been taught or was expected to learn as part of going to an alternative school.

4.21.2 Social Skills Instruction

In the group class, Stanley used direct instruction and also supported students to work independently on their end-of-year projects. He had the students circle up in their chairs and then asked them questions about their experiences with different facets of the skill they were learning, that year they learned about leadership. Ernie explained, "I think he just like taught it like talking to us about it and like from experience more. It's more of a experience class…" Ernie took the information learned during those lessons and realized the implications for working with others and leading them to complete a project. She understood that "…when you're in leadership,

you've gotta lead, so you gotta come up to someone and say hey, can you do this and then they do thing or then they say no…"

Ernie described how Stanley worked through direct instruction of a social skill. While in the circle they talked about a skill they needed in order to complete their end of year project.. While she was initially bored by the lessons Stanley taught about leadership and teamwork, she came to realize that the content was relevant to her interactions as a leader in other aspects of school life:

> I've been using [leadership skills] for my project and like…I also had to like do a presentation so that kind of stuff was, like, helped me lead a presentation especially with my other classes if I ever need to talk in front of people I can, like, do that and, like, work with other people for, like, group projects and, like, with my friend when they need something. You know?

She also indicated an overall positive effect: "I feel pretty confident about [leadership skills]. I'm feeling more confident in my skills to walk around, ask people for things."

Stanley's interactions with students were described by Ernie as both "invested" and "snoopy." She spoke fondly of him and mentioned him often throughout the interviews. At the same time, Ernie did not like his teaching style, because she felt his classroom was usually too confusing and chaotic for her. In both the classes she took from him, group and U.S. History, he supported her social skills by encouraging her to step into situations he knew she would not have done on her own. Ernie described Stanley's approach:

> Um, Stanley, the man, the myth, the legend. He's, like, put me more in, like, situations where I, like, need it. Cause, like, he can tell when, like, you need to do something, like deliberately, like, set something up to help you with it. Like if you need a specific thing he'll be, like, talk with that, or team up with them, and then things get done.

Ernie enjoyed her relationship with Sarah, her enrichment teacher. She described the relationship students had with their enrichment teachers as familial:

> Um, usually if you have, like, a problem with, like, how things are, like, structured or, like, say you want to change a class to something else you can talk to her about it and, like, stuff like that or, like, feeling down? She can be there for you. Some enrichment teachers do that. Most enrichment teachers do that, but. They're just kinda like a mom. Or a father. A parent.

Ernie explained that enrichment teachers at her school were available throughout the school day to talk with students if they needed support academically or if they were having a problem. She found this support to be beneficial and had talked with Sarah at lunch throughout the school year. Sometimes when they were meeting, Sarah would discuss a social skill with Ernie, implementing an impromptu 1:1 social skills lesson. Ernie was receptive to these meetings, but admitted that she would not necessarily go to Sarah if she had an issue with a social skill. Rather, Sarah would notice if there was a social aspect to Ernie's issue and then discussed it with Ernie.

Ernie expressed how she felt at ease with Sarah, because Sarah had disclosed that she had ADHD and how it affected her work as a teacher. However, interacting with Sarah was sometimes unclear for Ernie, as she described not understanding Sarah's social cues when they met:

> I feel like just talking to her is [learning social skills], because, she's kinda, I don't want to say confusing, but the most term I can find. Cause, like, sometimes she just laughs, and I don't know why she laughs at something I say if it's like funny or if it's, like, what she's thinking. It's kinda like I can build off of that and see, like, you know? Just kinda learn from experience from just talking to her.

Although Ernie was unsure of her social interactions with Sarah, she also realized that she could learn about socializing from analysis of those conversations. She was

consciously working toward understanding social interactions while with a person she felt comfortable with who understood the confusion that can occur while socializing.

4.21.3 Social Skills Instruction and Gender

Ernie was the only student in her high school who identified as both autistic and female. While there were many autistic and neurodivergent students at her school, the other autistic students were male. She was the only autistic young woman in her group and enrichment classes, which set her social skills experience apart from the other students. By going to a school with a culture of student independence, Ernie routinely challenged herself to use social skills in order to ask for help from teachers and even from other students.

We discussed the idea of social skills classes for autistic students. Ernie was intrigued at the concept of taking a social skills class that consisted only of other young women:

> I feel like it'd be easier to engage in that kinda class. Because, like, men in general are like, you know, they're men. They're a lot. And, like I, it's more, like, comfortable, like, talking to women. Cause, like, just with men in general. No. So, I feel like I'd interact with it more. Especially with a social skill class. And, like, feel like I can do things more there than I could with, like, a mixed bag.

Ernie expressed how she would rather engage with women in general. We talked about how the young men at her school were often loud and disrespectful, which she did not like. Ernie did not seek out many young men in her school to have as a friend. She preferred the company of young women and expressed she would like to know other autistic young women. Commiserating with other autistic women was important to her in order to share common experiences with each other.

4.22 What Other School-Based Experiences Contribute to Ernie's Perspectives on Learning and Using Social Skills?

4.22.1 Friendship

Ernie's friendships prior to attending ECS existed in virtual spaces. She stopped going to her middle school after a friend frightened her with stories of a ghost in the school. Ernie was then homeschooled through an online school platform. She did not have friends in person, but found people to connect with online through various social media outlets. While she felt like these friendships were authentic, she also understood that those friendships do not help her use the same socialization practices she would use if she was going to be friends with them in person. Ernie explained that her tendency to yell while hanging out with friends was not a part of online socialization, "…you don't have to be yourself online, so like I didn't have to yell. Or like didn't try to, so…because I didn't talk to anyone, so I didn't have anyone to see how it was bad or not." With the recent move to Oregon, in order to attend ECS, Ernie found a group of in-person friends at school who accepted her.

After Ernie moved, she met up with Rayne, a friend she initially met online. They took the opportunity of living in the same area to meet in person. Rayne identified as a person with a non-binary gender and used them/their/they pronouns. Ernie suggested they move into the same apartment building and apply to ECS. Rayne and their family followed through with Ernie's suggestions, which resulted in the friends living very close together and attending the same school. Ernie and Rayne suspected Rayne was autistic too. They often talked about autism together. Although Rayne was a close friend of Ernie's they did not always hang out together with the same friend group at school.

Ernie attributed much of her happiness at ECS to her authentic friendships. Initially it was difficult for her to meet people after she started attending ECS in the middle of the school year. Ernie described how her group of about five friends, "kind of like just started sitting with me and then adopted me as their friend." In the photo Ernie took, she was with her friends and they are sitting in a park near the school, on the ground in a circle. Ernie depicted each friend engaging in a behavior that was representative of themselves. She saw these friends outside of school on a regular basis. They went to the movies, had parties, and played video games together. During the in-school observation I noticed Ernie working comfortably with her friends on protest signs for the upcoming March for our Lives. Ernie's friend group consisted of peers who identified as female and non-binary. Many of them were like Ernie and identified as lesbian, one friend was bisexual. It was important to Ernie to have a group of female friends who identified similarly to her and that impacted her decision to be friends with someone:

> Like, with someone who's gay, you know, like, I can, like, talk about this specific thing and they'll, like, understand more likely. Or, like, if you talk about it with them they won't be ah, have the same reactions as, like, a straight person would. You know?

For social skills support, Ernie preferred to reach out to a friend rather than an adult. She articulated how her friends were helpful to her, because she knew that she needed some support with understanding social situations, saying, "If I talked to someone and they do a reaction, I'm not sure why they did it, I'll mention, like, haha why did that happen? And they're like I don't know or they're like maybe it's this…"

Ernie discussed how she realized she tended to practice a scripted conversation in her mind with her friends before talking with them. While this scripting was useful,

she also encountered some issues with understanding that her friends' responses were not what she initially thought they would say:

> I think of the whole situation. What I say and like what I do to, like, convey it and then, like, what they like respond with. And I, like, focus so much on how they respond that, like, I forget that they could have anything else. Cause I think I know them so well. And if they don't like respond that way I feel like huh? Betrayal. How? If I knew you. Get out of my house!

Ernie was close enough with her friends to deconstruct her frustration with their responses and ask them about their responses. In this manner, her friends, who she initially met at her school, were an important tool for her to learn what to expect in informal social contexts.

4.22.2 Male Peers

Ernie did not have a lot of friends who were male. She was close in age with her autistic older brother and they had a good sibling relationship, however they were not part of the same friend group. Ernie generally had little regard for her male classmates and preferred to be around women. This was in part due to her sexuality, but she also felt like the young men in her school were disrespectful and she expressed uncertainty about how they felt about her:

> …sometimes you just have like a fear of how they'll react to things. Like how, what people say, like women can do it too. It's just like men, just like, get that fear in general. Like you can't, it's not really like a trusting feeling when you meet one.

In the follow up interview, Ernie clarified her sentiments on men in her classes, which was connected to her identity as a lesbian. She thought her sexuality impacted how they may feel about her. The young men in her school engaged in obnoxious and closed-minded discussion. Usually when she socialized with them it was clear that

they did not practice empathy. Empathizing was a manifestation of understanding one another, and she did not feel understood by her male peers. The few male friends she had were "gay", because they seemed to exercise more empathy along with the common experience of being homosexual. She noted not all gay men are like this, but the ones she fostered friendships with were empathizing people. Additionally, Ernie had a feminist philosophical orientation toward the world. In general, she did not like to be around men due to the patriarchal power structure of our society.

4.22.3 School-based activities

Ernie's school did not offer many after-school activities. She felt that the system for offering after school activities was disorganized and she was unsure which clubs were meeting. To Ernie, this was a characteristic of attending an alternative school. She described her uncertainty about hearing about a student-run Dungeons and Dragons (DnD) club, which she was not interested in joining:

> Um usually it's, this school is very student run, so it's like usually students, like, make that kind of stuff. I think someone's making a DnD club, but I don't know if it's, like, official or not. So, I don't know if there's actually any clubs that, like, actually work out, so maybe the DnD club will.

Ernie expanded that she was also hesitant to do activities that required her to work on a team. She knew that she found activities to be more enjoyable when she worked by herself.

Generally, Ernie had a hard time with figuring out if she even wanted to engage in activities beyond the school day. She articulated her uncertainty with deciding on what to do with a club, "…getting myself out there can be kinda hard

sometimes, cause like I don't know what to do with that also, or what I want do. Like do I want a club? Do I want? What do I want?"

Aside from formal clubs, Ernie engaged in a few activities initiated by her school. She led tours of the school for families interested in applying to ECS during the annual ECS Open House. Also, Ernie was excited to make large, colorful signs at school with her friends, which she then used when they went to the March for Our Lives protest the next day. While these were not formal activities that met on a regular basis, Ernie realized these were opportunities for her to work on her social skills with other people while she could prepare for them on her own and felt supported by the teachers at school and her peers when she then went through with the activity.

4.22.4 School Socialization

At ECS, the students interacted with the teachers throughout their classes, this affected Ernie as she enjoyed going to her school because she was provided with more opportunities to learn through engagement rather than learning only from direct instruction by the teachers. Ernie enjoyed completing school work that was hands-on, which included completing packets or projects. She often had to ask the teachers to provide academic accommodations, because the school was in between special educators who would be in the position of communicating the stipulations of her 504 plan to her teachers. Socially, this created a situation where Ernie needed to do more advocating for herself than the other students who did not have any special services in place. Her unique alternative school context promoted adjusting to her learning style and embedded socialization throughout the school day. Ernie did not have a favorite class, but she enjoyed her biology class because they were doing activities with

microscopes and she was looking forward to their mid-term assignment, which was drawing cells and she enjoyed drawing.

Ernie realized sometimes she required accommodations in her classes. When she knew an accommodation would be useful, she would ask her teachers for their support. Socially, this provided her with opportunities to talk to her teachers about what would help her the most in her academic success. Use of a "guideline," or study guide, as a way to support her through the steps of an assignment was one accommodation Ernie realized was helpful to her success on assignments. She explained how using a guideline in her sociology class was helpful as the teacher was "walking me through it" and how he would ask her for her input on how the assignment would help her "work out a step-by-step process sometimes." Sociology was a class that was difficult for her, because "some of the assignments, um, are kinda hard. It's just like, some's about like social things, but I don't really have a grasp on it technically. I look like I do, but I really don't." Ernie found that talking with her teacher on using a guideline to complete these difficult assignments was one way to accommodate her successfully.

The U.S. History class, taught by Stanley, was a chaotic environment for her:

> …the way he structures things sometimes isn't that effective or good. And the students there all combined is a disaster. Everybody's loud and, like, interrupting, like, sometimes you have, like, really cool things, but sometimes it gets, like, draining just to think of that class.

Stanley usually gave open-ended assignments without the use of a guideline. She explained that a guideline would be helpful, because Stanley's assignments did not have enough structure for her and she felt like the combination of the open-ended aspect to his assignments along with requirements for group work made his assignments difficult for her. Ernie also felt her Spanish class was a chaotic place.

Ernie was divided about the chaotic atmosphere on her education. While the lack of structure was viewed as chaotic, she also enjoyed this aspect to some of her classes at her school. There was an appeal to the free form of these classes and she enjoyed observing all of the different scenarios that could shape a class period. For example, in her Spanish class the students worked together to decide songs to sing in that class. Whenever a student chose a song the rest of the class did not like they would talk about it together and choose another song.

Working in groups, or teams, was stressful for Ernie. She had difficulty figuring out "what people mean" in the context of the diverse student body, which made it confusing for her to understand if the group work they completed was meaningful, particularly in Stanley's class. She also expressed how she struggled emotionally with completing assignments in groups:

> Yea. It's like (pause). I don't know how to, like, contribute unless I'm doing it all. I don't know how like distribute work, so if someone does this, I do that, I don't really know how to do that. And even if I do it seems difficult, very much not what I want. I feel pain thinking of it. Cause like, I don't know, I feel, like, it's easier just to do it by myself, because I know what I'm doing. I don't know what they're doing or what they're thinking, so I can't really work with that.

Ernie found that working in groups with her friends was easier, because she knew "how their mind works more," and she knew their style of working together. Whenever she was with students she did not know as well it was difficult for her to engage with them, because, "I don't know how they are or what they find interesting, or funny, or useful or how they take in information, so it would be kinda hard to do that." Knowing her friends allowed Ernie to be able to anticipate how they would work with her in a group situation. When she was unfamiliar with other students it was more difficult for her to work with them.

4.22.5 Alternative education

Ernie described how the small size of her school, less than 80 students were enrolled in the high school, led to some interesting issues related to people knowing a lot about each other. She expressed how this manifested as "drama":

> There's a lot of drama. You'd think there wouldn't be, but it's usually like if a couple people, especially like since it's such a small school everyone knows everything about each other, especially about their drama usually, um, so there's a lot of it, I don't hate it, because I love hearing about other people's things for no reason, but it's a lot…

Ernie also felt that the organization of the school needed some re-working. She observed that the staff were not treated well, and felt the school was disorganized. Ernie described her frustration with this disorganization, "when the teachers don't even know what's going on… if we have a field trip the teachers don't know what's going on. Now talk to another teacher, and they're like go talk to the same teacher you just asked."

Another problematic aspect of her school was the lack of communication between staff and the board members. In a small charter school like ECS the school board members had an active role in the school community. She gave an example of the students being excited to participate in an end of year community-based project that was shut down by a member of the school's board minutes before they were about to start the community-based portion of the project. The school board member felt the project, handing out food to houseless people, was unsafe for the students.

Attending an alternative school also offered Ernie several opportunities to work on social skills that the school required of students, like asking for help or navigating chaotic classes, and also on social skills that she identified she needed help with on her own. The unstructured environment of the school and many of her classes

allowed Ernie to work independently with support when needed on some of her social skills. Ernie had identified that she was consciously working on being aware of how others reacted to her, putting herself in activities since she was unsure of what she wanted to do, and the general skill of talking to people and initiating conversations. Both Stanley and Sarah would gently correct her social skills if she needed that support. Also, she relied on her friends at school to support her in a similar type of gentle correction. Ernie's teachers and her mother noticed an improvement in her socialization since Ernie started at ECS and often mentioned it to Ernie. Ernie felt that attending this specific school environment helped her in fostering social skills.

4.23 How Does the Ongoing work of Learning Social Skills at School, via Instruction or Otherwise, Contribute to Ernie's Perspective on the Development of An Autistic Identity?

4.23.1 The Impact of Autism on School

Ernie discussed what she termed issues with "executive dysfunction" where she either could not start a school project, despite thinking about and had desire to start the project. She described that she would "want to do it with a passion" and then she found she "can't bring myself to do it at all." Alternatively, she had a hard time stopping her work on a project that she was intently focused on and did not want to complete it. In these examples, Ernie was describing what it was like to have autistic inertia, a common phenomenon among autistic people. It impacted her academic success and she reached out to her teachers for support and for extended deadlines on projects. To support her academically Ernie had to seek out the teachers and explain to them she was autistic and needed extra support in order to get started or understand when to finish school projects.

Ernie's primary sensory response was yelling when she was excited in school. She spoke about how she was not always aware of when she was yelling:

> …well I'm very like hyper sometimes, or like a lot, and I'm always screaming. If I ever scream, I don't know if I'm screaming ever, like whenever - I don't know if I'm yelling it sound like I'm yelling to myself, even when I'm whispering I feel like I'm yelling- so I don't know if I'm yelling if I do.

Ernie went on to describe that her friends and others at school understand and support her in being aware of when she was being too loud "I have, like, people that back me up and say, hey, like, maybe quiet down or, like, hey that's not ok, like with my friends and stuff, I haven't like had anyone who did that before…" She also felt that while her friends understood her that there were students at her school who did not understand that she could not control her volume the same way as students who are not autistic.

Other areas of sensory stimulation were her reaction to specific textures and the sensation of clothing or items on her skin. Her clothing choices were impacted by her reaction to clothing textures. She could become distracted by the sensation of a texture she did not like. Her outfits consisted of fabrics that were the least distracting and comfortable to her.

Ernie also experienced feeling drained after a full day at school. Recently, she discovered that she could hang out with friends for a little bit after school, but realized she needed time to wind down later at home from the social stimulation. This impacted Ernie's vision for her future living situation as an adult. She relished being alone and wanted to live by herself someday in order to be away from other people. However, she was uncertain if this was realistic, due to concerns about what she would still need to learn to do in order to live responsibly by herself.

Specific video games, web comics, and TV shows were Ernie's passions. While drawing itself was not one of Ernie's passions, she felt that her passions led to her drawing more frequently since she enjoyed drawing her favorite characters, which helped her practice drawing. Ernie enjoyed it when drawing was a component for her assignments at school. She also identified her friends as a passion. Ernie thought about her friends a lot and attributed the unique culture at ECS to providing her with the opportunity to find this group of friends.

4.23.2 The Masking Impulse

Ernie did not feel a need to directly hide being autistic, however she also did not disclose it readily to others. She was in the ongoing process of identifying when her behavior was marking her as autistic. Throughout our conversations she stated how most people could not tell if she was autistic. Also, she understood being autistic to set her apart from the other students as someone who was not normal like them. When we talked about what being autistic meant to her, Ernie articulated:

> (pause). It means (slow). That (slow). I work differently and that I can bring different and, like, experiences and thoughts to the table that others can't…Autism, as explained by some people, say you are wired differently. As the kids say!...Which means our brains are, just aren't the way, like, someone else's is, so we have different reactions to different things and, like, different traits that would, like, isn't, "what are normal" as the kids also say, talk about…So, if we have different, like, experiences, we can see things in a different way. As you'd assume…So, it's kinda like a fresh new perspective. And sometimes we can see it in a different light than others. And, like, that's actually useful information, thank you. And we say no problem. We're here for you.

When Ernie disclosed she was autistic to others she "…never had a bad reaction" and felt like disclosure was a way to be closer with others as it helped people understand her better. She never had a friend ask her if she was autistic.

At the follow up interview Ernie clarified she realized when her behavior, like fidgeting or rocking back and forth, could signal to people that she is autistic. However, most people did not realize she was autistic. She consistently received the reaction that people were shocked when she disclosed how much support she required at school and home, because she did not appear to be autistic. Ernie thought people viewed her as quirky. She was clear that she was not ashamed of being autistic. Ernie was working on restricting her autistic mannerisms in an to attempt to appear like she was composed and put together. By working on this restriction of her autistic mannerisms in order to appear "normal", Ernie attempted to craft a certain persona that was outside of being autistic, but then she would forget, and fidget or rock back and forth. However, Ernie also realized she was unable to control or stop her autistic traits. When she found herself fidgeting or rocking, she would continue with that mannerism, knowing that she would likely forget again if she tried to stop.

4.23.3 Marking Autistic Identity

Ernie always knew she was autistic and could not remember when she was told for the first time. Some of Ernie's family members were autistic, including her mother and her brother, but they did not have much meaningful conversation to about autism at home or school. Ernie had recently completed her own research online about autism and met some autistic people over social media platforms. For her end of year project in 9th grade, Ernie decided to research autism and learned much about it from that assignment. Although Ernie had not explicitly learned about autism from many others,

she expressed “I just knew I had it…recently I’ve been learning more things about it and other people’s experiences and actually trying to, like, learn more about it. And by now, like, oh that thing, that was because I have autism…”

Autistic cultural items were known to Ernie. She was familiar with the term neurodiversity, and understood Autism Speaks was an organization “who frame their selves to be like supportive, but really they think autistic people like need a cure and stuff.” She was unaware of other autism organizations. Ernie said that she learned the most about autism through checking in on autistic people through their social media sites. Learning through the experiences of other autistic people was Ernie’s preferred way to find out about autism.

Ernie liked to suspect if characters in movies, TV shows or video games were autistic. One of her passions at the time was the *Spongebob Musical*, and she playfully mused that several of the characters were autistic. She also observed the characters in a video game and realized they seemed to be autistic in some way that stood out to her. A certain character engaging in “being blunt” and “oblivious” as well as how his hands were animated signaled to her that character might be autistic.

While Ernie had family members who were autistic, this was a fairly recent development for her understanding of autism. When she was growing up, autism was not talked about much, then her mom was diagnosed with autism a few years ago and they started talking about some more. While Ernie did not go to her mother to talk about autism, she felt that her mother’s recent autism label “explains things more” in terms of understanding why she is autistic, indicating a genetic component to autism. Aside from her mom, Ernie did not know any other autistic women and only a few other autistic people. She was able to make assumptions about other students at school

being autistic through observing their behavior, and then she would casually bring it up as something they may have in common. With the other students, Ernie would only talk about minor things related to autism, like sensory stimulation with textures.

Ernie's school provided her with opportunities to further explore autism through choosing what she wanted to do for her end of year project and fostering that kind of exploration in other students. She learned about autism when another autistic student wanted to talk about autism for an interview assignment, they had in their journalism class. Ernie's teachers shared that a young man in her school was known as an autistic self-advocate and used an alternative augmentative communication system with a paraprofessional's support. Also, Ernie was comfortable talking about autism with her peers at school.

4.23.4 Autism at the Intersection with Gender

> I feel like having autism, like, makes gender, like, different for some people on the spectrum. And, like, approach, like, gender and sexuality, like, entirely different. Um, so I guess kinda means, like, how, like how I'm attracted to, like, women…I don't know. It seems kinda nice. Like knowing that I'm a woman. Kinda like a soft warm feeling.

In the excerpt above, Ernie expressed how her understanding of gender was different from people who were not autistic. She realized that people who are not autistic understand gender as a female/male binary, while she felt gender was more fluid. Ernie discussed how gender was socially constructed and she understood how the social construction of a person's gender does not change the concept of autism. To Ernie, gender was fluid, but autism was a constant, which meant that autistic people all experienced autism differently, regardless of their gender. She felt that the intersection of autism and gender was rooted in how autistic people had this different experience

of gender. Put another way, autism itself was experienced the same way depending on one's gender, because gender was not necessarily a constant component to one's life, autism was "just different symptoms, depending on the person."

Gender was viewed and performed abstractly by Ernie. She did not desire to present any feminine expectation of a woman and therefore she did not present as a young woman. Ernie felt that "autism is a big sprinkle of confusion" with regard to how she could not connect with any of the binary gender constructs. Yet, she understood the tension inherent in her own view on the gender binary, because she admitted to loving the essence of women, and felt warmth in her identity as a woman and lesbian. She had settled this by preferring a non-binary gender identity in some circumstance, in other circumstances, like participating in this study, she preferred to be labeled as female. Overall, she felt her own gender identity was set apart from the male/female binary, but understood that the rest of society was broadly constructed into a gendered binary.

Ernie also connected her sexuality to being autistic. She viewed her homosexuality as an aspect that went hand-in-hand with her fluid conceptualization of gender, where autistic people also understood sexuality to be more fluid. Her identification as a lesbian was important to her and her understanding of womanhood, despite her issue with binary gender construction. Ernie's identity as a lesbian was important for her to connect with being a woman and wanting to be around women. Additionally, her sexuality was a means for her to connect with her friends, who were also queer, and she had figured out she was most comfortable with other queer people.

4.24 Ernie's Summary

The alternative educational setting in the democratic charter school led to unique opportunities for Ernie to learn and then use social skills. Two classes were offered as part of the regular school curriculum, group and enrichment, where she was taught social skills through direct and embedded instruction. The school developed a culture encouraging students to advocate for their own supports, which provided Ernie with many opportunities for embedded social instruction. Her group and enrichment teachers observed Ernie's social skills and occasionally approached her with gentle reminders to support her socialization at school.

Friends were an essential aspect to Ernie's time at school. Ernie's relationships with her friends were extremely important to her, especially after experiencing a dearth of in-person friendships for several years. Her group of friends supported her informally with her social skills. Additionally, Ernie utilized her friends for her personal social goals and had many realizations about how she proceeded with social skills improvement from her conversations with her friends. She understood her own social processing, and eloquently spoke to the experience of learning a new social skill.

Ernie's autistic identity was developed through her own social media searching of learning about the experiences of other autistic people. While she knew some autistic peers at her school, she did not have any autistic friends and did not know any other autistic women aside from her mother. While she and her mom talked about autism, Ernie did not feel that those conversations were an important aspect to learning about autism. Ernie realized her understanding of gender and sexuality was different, and she thought it was due to being autistic. She also acknowledged that autism existed separately from gender and considered gender to be a socially

constructed phenomenon. While she had some awareness of the issues autistic activists have identified with Autism Speaks, she did not know of any other autism organizations. Ernie was in the process of understanding how others determined if she's autistic, or not, and in figuring out others' reactions to her autistic mannerisms. She liked being autistic and had sought to understand it better in recent years. Her school provided her, and other autistic students, with supportive assignments for autistic students to learn more about autism, which Ernie utilized for herself and also remembered when other autistic students used those opportunities.

4.25 Tayson

4.26 Profile

Tayson was the first student to be recruited for participation in this study. She lived in Greenway, a rural coastal community in Oregon. The area was serene, surrounded by coastal mountain ranges. Due to the beautiful scenery and proximity to the coast this community was a minor tourist destination during the summer months. Tayson lived in Greenway her entire life and attended the public schools in her local district. At the time of the study, Tayson was a freshman at Greenway High School (GHS) a public 4-year high school. The GHS campus consisted of a sprawling one-story main building and a technical high school located nearby. Inside GHS the walls were adorned with student-made posters advertising athletic events and school clubs. The school ran on a trimester system with block scheduling. At the time of our interviews, Tayson was in the second trimester of her school year.

Tayson was referred to me by an autism specialist, who provided me with the phone number of her parent. After speaking with the parent on the phone, and

determining Tayson had a label of Asperger's and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) we agreed that Tayson and I would meet for the interviews after school in an empty classroom. Tayson had her own smart phone and we texted each other and her mom to coordinate the best days for meeting. Tayson recently turned 15 years old when she participated in the study. She enjoyed writing, however she admitted that having ADD was distracting to her writing process. After high school she wanted to attend a college about an hour away from her home town and major in writing.

During our interviews Tayson consistently identified herself as having ADD and anxiety. She was aware of being labeled with Asperger's, however she did not have any knowledge of what it meant to have Asperger's and did not identify with this label. Tayson had an IEP, but was unfamiliar with the details of her plan and had not yet had an IEP meeting during that school year. Her special education case manager was also her math teacher in a resource room setting. She was not fond of her math teacher. In some of her classes, Tayson was allowed to listen to music with her phone, which assisted her with concentrating on school tasks. Tayson participated in school choir with her friends for many years.

Tayson received social skills instruction in the Exploration class, taught by Mr. Miranda. I interviewed him about the course and observed one of the course sessions. This course was a collaborative effort brought to GHS by Mr. Miranda and colleagues as a social emotional curriculum for freshmen students. The aims for this course included supporting students at risk of dropping out and to provide students with holistic preparation of how to handle high school demands. Both Tayson and Mr. Miranda stated the importance of social skills instruction in this course. Tayson found the social skills instruction in the Exploration class to be valuable, particularly the

role-playing activities. She enjoyed the course and identified Mr. Miranda as her favorite teacher. He was her study hall teacher for the remainder of the year after the course concluded.

In our initial discussion, Tayson's parent shared that Tayson was seeing the school counselor, in part for social skills instruction. However, according to Tayson they had stopped meeting regularly. Social skills instruction was a component to their meetings, along with regulation strategies for her increasing anxiety. Specifically, the counselor assisted her with focusing on strategies to support her anxiety at the larger high school building. I attempted to schedule an interview with the counselor, however she was in semi-retirement with a part-time schedule and we were unable to arrange a meeting time.

Tayson had a small number of close friends at school, who she often interacted with outside of school as well. She had maintained friendships with the same four to five friends, with most of the relationships starting in elementary school. Tayson kept in touch with a close friend who moved away but continued to visit Greenway on a regular basis to visit with his family. Tayson enjoyed her classes more when a friend was in class with her, so they could socialize occasionally. Tayson's friends were female, except for the friend who visited with her when he came to town.

In her photos, Tayson highlighted two social spaces in her school, noting these were places where she liked to hang out with her friends. The first photograph was of the choir hallway, where she sometimes ate lunch with her group of friends. The second photograph was a specific locker area, where she lamented missing a friend who had recently left the school. They used to hang out at this locker with each other

and a different group of friends. After the friend left, Tayson no longer saw the other students.

Tayson discussed her recent experiences with social anxiety increasing throughout the school year. She thought her school was a scary place, due to the large number of students, particularly in the hallways. Her social anxiety occurred when she tried to meet new people and make new friends, stating she would run away from them once she approached someone new. Accommodations were not in place at school for this increasing anxiety. Tayson did not enjoy working in groups with students, particularly when a friend was not in a class with her. She relied on the teacher to put her in a group and often stayed quiet during the project. If a friend was in class, then she would always choose to be in a group with her friend. Tayson had considered transferring to a smaller school later in the school year, but ended up staying at GHS.

Tayson was a person with a reserved personality. She was quiet, even during our informal conversations before and after the interviews. As we talked her head was usually tucked down, with her hair falling forward. During our interviews, Tayson's responses were usually very short and I asked follow-up and clarifying questions in order to find out more specific details. However, by the third and follow-up interviews she readily spoke about ADD, anxiety, and how it affected her daily life at school.

4.27 The Social Skills Class

Tayson learned social skills while taking the Exploration class. This class was recently implemented by GHS as a requirement each student must take for one trimester during their freshman year. The Exploration class used a social-emotional curriculum that the teacher, Mr. Miranda, had recently discovered to support ninth grade students as they entered high school with understanding specific social skills

that they would need to use in order to be successful throughout high school. For Tayson this course had much impact on her understanding of social skills and how learning them can be important for her to generalize the use of those skills beyond that of the classroom.

The Exploration class was enjoyable for Tayson. This was the first social emotional class she had taken. She found the skills she learned to be relevant, and she often made connections to social skills she learned previously. Tayson had several friends taking the class with her and she found herself learning from the experiences of the other students. Mr. Miranda was Tayson's favorite teacher, which positively impacted her learning in that class. She felt that his pedagogical methods, like role playing and conversation circles, were beneficial for her to learn the skills taught in Exploration. Disability was briefly discussed in class. The Exploration class did not directly cover issues related to gender. The class was co-ed and Tayson was one of many girls in her class period.

4.28 How Does Tayson Interpret and Make Use of the Social Skills Instruction She Receives?

4.28.1 Specific Skills Learned and Used

Tayson reported she learned several key social skills while taking the Exploration class, which were relevant to her social life. She felt the content was highly relevant to her life, as she articulated her thoughts on the longevity of the skills she learned in that class "…it's really helpful when you get older in life. …you would learn a lot more about, like, social skills and, um, life skills really." Tayson realized that many of the social skills she learned in that class were also skills that would be useful for her in her daily life over time.

One of the social skills she talked about was learning about being aware of other people who were around her when she was talking. Tayson spoke about how being aware of others was important "if you are, like, saying, like ,to someone a secret or something, you have to, like, be aware of people around you" she went on to talk about how "it could start drama if other people are listening, which is not good." Tayson had not realized that it was important to be sensitive to others when sharing private information with her friends. This had been a minor issue for her with her friends in the past, and she better understood the issue once she learned about it in the class.

She also learned about maturation and the differences between how children, teens, and adults act. Tayson discussed her experience with this concept," …learning about, like, how adults act and how children act and how teenagers act. I thought it was interesting. Just like seeing how adults act compared to children and teenagers." Even though this was something she felt she already knew, it helped her to better understand the concept of maturity and highlighted the differences in behavior depending on age. Tayson also found learning about the difference between empathy and sympathy important to her. She had not previously known the nuances with each emotion. The application of empathy and sympathy were especially important to her, and she enjoyed that she learned about it and how to use each emotion appropriately.

4.28.2 Social Skills Instruction

Mr. Miranda lectured, encouraged full and small group discussions, used online videos, and encouraged the students to work together in groups. The group work usually consisted of role plays or discussion activities. Along with the curriculum activities Mr. Miranda also incorporated current events into the lessons.

Mr. Miranda strove to cultivate a classroom community where he encouraged confidentiality and respect for each other. He wanted the students to feel safe and to share their experiences with each other.

Mr. Miranda was Tayson's favorite teacher that year. She felt that, "he's super, like, laid back and he doesn't really care, like, that much, but then he does care, like, a lot about us…he's really cool." In addition to learning a lot from him, she also came away from the class realizing that his laid-back attitude was connected to her understanding that he cared about his students, which made her feel comfortable in his class. She noted that how Mr. Miranda "was super nice" and that helped her feel like his classroom was a safe space to share personal experiences with other students. Tayson felt comfortable approaching Mr. Miranda on her own in order to talk with him about specific skills, such as being aware of others. It was important to her to understand how to use that skill in her daily life.

The pedagogical methods used by Mr. Miranda resonated with Tayson. Particularly his use of role-playing activities. She described how role plays were used in the class:

> We basically learned, um, different scenarios of what to say to each other. Like, we did one where someone's yelling at another person telling them to clean their room. Or, like, share the game or something. And then we did, like, like, a good example of two people, like, fighting over something and then they forgave each other for it. And basically, we just made up scenarios for that and then we performed them in front of the class.

The role play activities usually involved either Mr. Miranda or the students developing a scenario based off of ideas that either Mr. Miranda provided the students, or the student groups developed them on their own. Tayson remarked "…it's interesting to like see what kinds of stuff, like, he gives us to say to one another." She learned much

from these activities and gave an example of a role play prompt as, "…siblings fighting with each other. People fighting with each other and then forgiving each other." The finished role plays would be short, about 1-3 minutes in length and then the groups performed them for the class with discussion on how the role plays went for everyone. Tayson was usually in a group with her friends when she completed the role play activities.

Conversation circles were another pedagogical method Mr. Miranda applied in this class. This was a way for the students in the class to share their experiences and their stories with the group, in order to learn from each other. Tayson "really enjoyed [it], because ,like, you get to hear people's, like, how people's days are going and how their life's going." This activity caused some anxiety for Tayson: "I kind of felt like, like it was kind of scary, just, like, being in a circle with kids from my school, like, hearing what I have to say about myself." Noting that this caused her some anxiety, she also realized that the benefits of sharing and trusting the other students outweighed her initial reservations about the activity. She felt that over time the students maintained confidentiality about what was shared in the conversation circles.

4.29 Social skills instruction and gender

Tayson was not positioned as set apart or othered from her social skills class in any way that made her feel different from the other students. She was one of several girls, and while disability was discussed during the class, it was a within the context of the unit and she was not expected to speak about her experiences with special education. Tayson did not recall specifically what was discussed about disability, but she knew it occurred at the start of the trimester and she did not share her experiences. This was considered a general education class all the students had to take and there

was eventually an understanding among the class that what the students shared would remain confidential, as there was a need to feel comfortable in the class. Mr. Miranda's personality and caring attitude for the students helped to facilitate the comfortable classroom space. While Tayson said she shared her experiences, she felt vulnerable and had to trust the others to understand her perspective.

When asked about the possibility of taking this class with only other girls, Tayson thought it would be, "better for me, because I don't really, like, get along with guys that well." She felt "more comfortable," with girls saying, "I get along with them way more. They're more understanding and since I am a girl, they're the same as me basically, so. It's easier."

Although Tayson was comfortable in the class when she took it, she would have felt more comfortable around other girls and would have benefitted from taking this class without the male presence. She regarded most of the boys in her classes as loud. While Mr. Miranda was able to achieve a comfortable, and safe classroom environment, Tayson would have wanted to commiserate some more on experiences that are particular to girls only.

4.30 What Other School-Based Experiences Contribute to Tayson's Perspectives on Learning and Using Social Skills?

4.30.1 Friendship

School was more enjoyable for Tayson when she had friends in her classes. She had a core group of close friends she had kept since elementary school. They kept in touch outside of school over social media and through texting. Also, they hung out in the community at the YMCA or local cafes. Tayson preferred to talk to people through text than any other medium, and she often texted with her friends. Most of her

friends were girls, with Tayson maintaining a long-term friendship with a boy who had moved away, but he often came back to their town for visits with family. They would make an effort to see each other. One of her school friends was another girl in special education classes with her, who also had ADD. Both of Tayson's photos revealed the importance of friends for her at school. Her friendships were the highlight of her school day.

Tayson liked to talk with her friends when they were in class with each other, which usually resulted in their seats placed apart from each other. She said, "…teachers kinda separate us far away from each other, because they know we like to talk a lot, so it's kinda hard to want to talk to her, because she's too far away." In her math class, which was taught in a special education resource room, she was allowed to sit next to her friend who also had ADD, which made that class, one that she did not like, better for her.

One of her photos depicted the hall that led to the choir room. The hallway meant a lot to her, because of her relationships with friends and buddies in choir. The hallway reminded her of being with them before a choir concert. While she enjoyed singing, Tayson also liked that she had friends in choir. One of her friends from choir left the school to continue her education at an online school, due to an issue with another student at GHS. Tayson's second photo, of a locker, was a place where she used to hang out with that friend and her friends. Tayson usually listened in on their conversations, causally participating in that friend group. After that friend left, she did not stay in contact with the other friends, and seldom passed by the locker anymore. She stayed in touch with the friend who left and at the follow up interview Tayson relayed they had maintained their friendship outside of school.

Tayson had difficulty making new friends. She had an anxious response to meeting new people that she attributed to having social anxiety. After she approached a person she would run away from the interaction before saying anything to them. This response was troublesome to Tayson, and she attributed it to her inability to meet new people on her own. She described how her anxiety with approaching new people was an effort for her: "It's kind of hard. Cause, like, well it's mainly hard for me because I have anxiety. Like, walking up to people is the scary part. So yea, it's pretty hard." Aside from her friends, she did not feel that anyone else at her school helped her with this issue. Tayson described what it was like for her to try to talk to new people:

> I'll see someone and I'll be like, oh they look nice I want to be friends with them, but I'm too scared to talk to them. And my friends will be like, oh you should go talk to them and I'll be like ooh, I'm a little too scared.

Her friends were a source of support for her in her attempts to make new friends, even if they were unsuccessful. In the follow up interview, she described meeting her boyfriend at school. She initially felt some anxiety at their initial interactions, but then settled into talking with him.

An issue with her best friend that started on social media and then extended further into their school activities was explained by Tayson and she did not want to be friends with her anymore. She described what happened:

> Um, she just started saying some mean stuff about me online. Like, like, I never would not never. I just started not riding the bus lately. And she gets mad when I don't ride the bus and then she starts calling me names, like, oh you're so, you're so dumb, or you're an idiot, like, that's not my fault… And then, like, today this happened. She texted me and said are you going to be riding the bus and then I said no, I'm not I have a, I have a meeting and then she said, oh you're so self-centered. I'm like no! That's not being self-centered.

At the follow up interview, Tayson updated that they became friends again and were hanging out both in school and outside of school. She knew what to expect from a healthy friendship and did not want her friends to take advantage of her.

Tayson was sometimes frustrated with her friends who were not in special education. They did not understand why she received certain accommodations and thought it was weird that she left the classroom for testing in another room. Her friends often questioned her why she was leaving. In response, Tayson did not want to talk about her special education accommodations. She had disclosed to her friends that she had issues with focusing, but did not want to continue to talk about it every time an accommodation was provided.

4.30.2 Male Peers

The majority of Tayson's friends were girls. She expressed that the boys in her classes were annoying and loud and that it was difficult to be friends with boys her age. Tayson preferred to be around girls. She felt that girls were nicer, although there were some social dynamics to hanging out with girls that were a source of struggle for Tayson. Despite the preference for hanging out with girls, Tayson had some male friends and a boyfriend. One of the male friends was the one who moved away, who has been her longest friendship.

The gender make-up of Tayson's friend group was connected to being with friends who made her feel comfortable. Since Tayson had not made many changes to her friend group since she was in elementary school, it was those friendships that she had maintained over time. In keeping with Tayson's anxiety with meeting new people, she had not been able to foster many new friendships and kept most of her longtime, mostly female, friendships.

4.30.3 School-Based Activities

Tayson did not participate in any extracurricular activities when we were completing the interviews. At the follow-up interview she described that she had tried to join the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) at the beginning of the school year when she was in 9th grade. The club did not stay activated that year, because the teacher sponsor left the door open during their meetings, which did not create a safe space for the students to honestly talk about their experiences. There was a little more success with the group that year, with a few students consistently attending the meetings. The teacher started closing the door at the meetings, and she noticed the students felt that was an important aspect to developing trust in those meetings. GSA was important to Tayson, because she identified as bisexual. She had taken initiative to work with the teacher and excitedly talked about her involvement in bringing the club back. Before we met for the follow up meeting, she had just hung up handmade flyers advertising the club and their next meeting date.

4.30.4 Classroom Socialization

Math and language arts (LA) were Tayson's special education classes. Since she aspired to be a writer someday, it was important to her to have opportunities in LA to write, which her teacher provided. Also, Tayson's teacher instilled confidence in her that she was a strong writer. At the follow up meeting, Tayson shared that her teacher asked to have her try out an honors LA class. This made her anxious, as she realized she did not have much homework or many academic demands placed on her in the current class.

Tayson's other special education class was math, with her case manager, Mr. Jones. She did not like this teacher, saying that he often yelled at the class. Although

she was allowed to sit next to her friend, there was an expectation that they could not talk to each other while they were working. She described what it was like in this class for her and her friend:

> …we, I, just, we both get yelled at for, like, doing random things. Like, my friend will start, like, humming, because the teacher said we can't listen to music, and he's like you can't do that either. My friend will just get really mad, and it kinda makes me mad too, because humming is humming, it's not really that big of a problem.

The teacher's restrictions resulted in Tayson becoming angry at the teacher, and there was a lack of communication to Tayson and her friend about the rationale for the social rules.

Mr. Jones also held the IEP meetings. Tayson could not remember details of her IEP and felt that social skills might be included in the document. At the follow up meeting she realized that she had been invited to the last meeting, but she did not attend, with her mom relaying back to her what was discussed. Tayson was aware that part of her special education programming included being in the resource room math and LA classes, as well as a testing accommodation, where she went to a special education room to take tests. Tayson was unaware of any accommodations for social anxiety. She did not feel like she was a participant in the IEP process, but was told by adults what was in the IEP and consisted of her special education programming.

Tayson liked science, particularly doing science experiments. These hands-on activities were more interesting to her than listening to the teacher lecture. However, her first trimester at GHS she failed her science class, because she did not find it to be engaging enough. When she retook the class her second trimester, she found it to be much more interesting. Tayson discussed what happened:

> …And I didn't really like my science class last trimester. I just didn't feel like it was the kind of science that I like and it's like different. When I failed that class and I have to retake it. And this physical science that I'm in now, which is Physical Science, is way more funner than I expected it was going to be, because it's, like, involving experiment and scientific other stuff.

Pottery and choir were the elective courses Tayson talked about. Both classes were enjoyable for her, due to having friends in the classes as well as enjoying the content. She had one friend in pottery class, who she hung out with during that class. In choir, she many students were her buddies and a couple of her long term friends were also in choir.

Group work was a struggle when Tayson did not have friends in her classes. She did not feel like the other students respected her and did not feel like they were working together. Tayson articulated what it was like when she had to do group work and there were no friends in her class:

> …if I don't' have any friends in any of my classes I get like kind of nervous about like when we do partners and stuff. I don't really know who to be partners with…I usually end up having like the teacher, like pick a person that doesn't have a partner for me or something.

When they had classes together, Tayson and her friends worked together when group work was required. Tayson felt respected working in groups with her friends. It was easier for her to independently find which people she wanted to work with if there were friends in her classes. She was almost always allowed to work with her friends, and she felt they were productive in their assignments.

4.31 How Does the Ongoing Work of Learning Social Skills at School, via Instruction or Otherwise, Contribute to Tayson's Perspective on the Development of a Neurodivergent Identity?

4.31.1 The Impact of Neurodivergent Traits on School

Tayson described herself as having "conditions," which were ADD and anxiety. She strongly identified with having Attention Deficit Disorder. When asked about the difference between ADD and ADHD she was unaware of what the letters in ADHD meant. Tayson described what having ADD meant to her at school:

> Ok. Um, I think it means like, (pause), to me it means, like I can't really focus a lot in class and it's hard for me to pay attention when I have like my friends around me and I'm always talking to them and when I don't have them around me it makes it even worse for me to try and focus, because I'm just like sitting there, have a hundred things on my mind and I'm just totally spaced out.

While Tayson was doing well academically in her classes, she experienced some discomfort with the other students. It was a struggle for her to pay attention in her classes when they were disruptive. She described what it was like to try to concentration with distractions:

> …it's hard for me because I can't really focus much in class, with like all the other people around me just like screaming and yelling, because they have mainly like the same problem as I do, they can't focus and their like yelling with their friends. It gets kinda annoying so, it's hard.

Although Tayson admitted she did not have many academic demands placed on her, she tried her best to focus on her classwork and found it difficult, due to the noise created by other students. She wanted all of her teachers to understand how ADD impacted her ability to focus. Tayson liked to listen to music using earbuds through her phone and thought it helped her focus on her school work. The only teacher who allowed her to do this was Mr. Jones, her math teacher who was her special education

case manager. At the follow up interview the following school year Tayson reported that GHS had instituted a new policy banning phones. She was not provided accommodation to use her phone to listen to music. Tayson suspected that most of her teachers did not take her seriously when she said that music helped her concentrate, with only Mr. Jones supporting her self-initiated accommodation prior to the cell phone ban. She used to take medication to help her focus, but stopped taking it, because she had a physical gagging reaction to taking oral medication.

Tayson's social anxiety was exasperated at her school, as she wanted to talk to the other students, but had an issue since she was in sixth grade with walking up to peers she did not know. She described the connection between this response and going to her school:

> …it's not fun and it's really hard at a big school like this. And it's also really hard trying to, like, talk to other people. Like, if there's a new person in our school or something I think like they look nice and I should talk to them. Then I realize I can't do that, because I'll get too scared and run off or something. That's usually what I do when I try and talk to people.

Tayson attempted to make new friends through approaching other students, but then reacted by running away from them just before talking. This occurred when she was by herself and had been an issue for her for several years. She was seeing a counselor outside of school to help her with this behavior. It was one of the main reasons why she could not make new friends.

Navigating the hallways was a struggle for Tayson. She had recently "noticed a few weeks ago how scary it is with all the kids in the school and how many other people there is" which made traversing the hallways difficult for her. She explained the emotional reaction she had when she walked through the school hallways:

> …like, when I'm walking to another class in the hallway there's always, like, a group of people just kind of off to the side or, like, some in the middle just kind of standing there and it just, like, makes me mad and, like, scared, because of my anxiety and then I get really mad, because they're in the way and I'm trying to, like, get to my class.

Her counselor outside of school helped her with self-regulation methods, like breathing, or counting to ten whenever she became overwhelmed by the other students in the hallways. Also, she had started the school year seeing the school counselor, who gave her similar self-regulation approaches, but she did not see the school counselor on a regular basis.

Tayson was passionate about writing, saying "…it just kind of like inspires me to do something in life, which is writing, is what I do in life." She continued that she found writing "… interesting, like all of the stories that I write are just for me." She was working on several books and at the follow up interview she proudly reported that she had finished a book. Her family members and friends told her that they enjoyed reading it and were encouraging her to look into getting it published. Tayson loved to write so much that she wanted to go to college to be able to major in writing. ADD impacted her writing, as she found it took her a long time to finish a story, due to being distracted. However, she always came back to her writing tasks.

Tayson also enjoyed drawing and eyes were her current favorite item to draw. Often when she was working on a drawing she would disengage and lose focus. Tayson described, "when I am trying to draw sometimes my mind will just like wander off and then I'll forget what I'm doing. Then I'll get bored with drawing and then I'll stop drawing." Sometimes she came back to the drawing and finished it, but she admitted that she "usually never get[s] back to them."

4.31.2 The Masking Impulse

There were some stigmatizing issues toward special education students at GHS. General education students in the school regarded students accessing a specific special education room as disabled in a derogatory manner. When Tayson spoke to her friends who were not receiving special education services she often observed their lack of understanding about her accommodation needs. She rarely talked to her friends about having ADD. Sometimes they would help her with learning a social skill related to her anxiety. Tayson felt that other people realizing she required special education support was, "… uncommon though, because you can't really tell if I do or not." She did not find ADD to be a positive aspect to her identity and tried to make sure others could not tell she had ADD.

After disclosure to her friends, she did not revisit that she had ADD with them, unless it came up in conversation. All but one of her friends knew she had ADD and there was no particular reason she had not told that friend. She treated disclosure casually, letting it come up naturally in conversation. When she was with her friends, Tayson did not focus on having ADD as a main aspect to her life, rather she rarely talked about it with her friends. Tayson's friends were aware of her issues with social anxiety, because they were a source of support, trying to help her with meeting new people.

4.31.3 Marking Neurodivergent Identity

Tayson was unique to this study in how she identified with her disability labels. She was initially referred to be in this study from an autism specialist who worked with her. In my conversations with her parent she was certain of Tayson's Asperger's label. However, Tayson identified as a person with ADD. She considered

her disability labels to be "conditions." Tayson was aware of being labeled as having Asperger's but did not know what it meant. Since she did not identify as having autism, her neurodivergent identities in relation to ADD and anxiety were explored, rather than her autistic identity. Tayson's identity as someone with ADD and anxiety falls under the umbrella of neurodiversity, therefore there is still much to be learned from her experiences that both set her apart and are similar to the other students in this study who more readily accepted their autistic identity.

Tayson was first diagnosed with ADD when she was in fourth grade. She considered placement in special education classes a clear marker of before and after the diagnosis. Tayson remembered before fourth grade she was not in special education classes, and after fourth grade she was put into special education classes and stayed in that track. Having ADD was not enjoyable for Tayson. She was unable to recognize any positive aspects. Tayson felt ADD was "…not fun, it's hard, and I can never focus." Having ADD impacted her ability to be social, because she needed to learn to socialize in a different way than peers who did not. Tayson described several times throughout our interviews how she experienced social issues with her friends, such as learning when to be aware of others in the immediate vicinity when telling secret information to a friend.

Tayson had another label of Asperger's Disorder and experienced social anxiety. Tayson did not know what Asperger's was and did not identify as a person with that label. She was aware that it was a label she had been given but did not remember any conversations or anyone talking to her about what it meant. Tayson initially did not identify herself as a person with anxiety, but over the course of our interviews she talked about her issues with anxiety at school, which increased over the

school year. Tayson did not identify with it as much as she identified herself as a person with ADD.

When asked about the term autistic Tayson preferred person-first language. The word autistic felt like a label and she did not like the concept of being labeled. Her experience with the term autistic was negative, due to the how students in her school acted toward students like herself who were in special education and needed to access a specific area of the school for their testing accommodations. She described the attitude students in her school without disability labels had toward students receiving special education services and how they viewed the term *autistic*:

> I just feel like a lot of people around this school who don't have issues, like a couple of us kids here, I feel like that's what they choose to call us instead of like, what we actually have. Because they think it's like oh, everyone in the school that's in that area's like autistic or like mental, which is like, kind of offensive toward them. And I feel like not that great just saying like, I know that I don't know what kinds of disorders they have, but there could be a better way of saying it instead of that.

Tayson was unfamiliar with resources like blogs, books, organizations, or self-advocates with ADD, anxiety, or autism. She had looked up some information online about ADD on her own. There were no discussions about ADD with her teachers or counselors at school. For anxiety, Tayson had reviewed self-regulation strategies regularly with a counselor outside of school, and a few times with the counselor in school. Tayson did not see the school counselor on a regular basis, despite finding her suggestions helpful when they met.

Tayson did not know anyone older than her who had ADD. She had one friend at school, the friend who sat next to her in math, who also had ADD. Tayson did not think it was beneficial to know other people with ADD. She was aware of common

ADD traits and sometimes talked about ADD with her mom. They suspected a child of her mom's friend might had ADD and often talked about it together and with the friend. Tayson also suspected a character on a TV show she watched might have ADD, based on her observations of that character's unique mannerisms.

4.31.4 Neurodivergence at the Intersection of Gender

Tayson identified as a bisexual female. She was not feminine in her style, mentioning that she wore a lot of pink when she was younger, and now she does not like a super feminine look anymore. She attempted to keep up with what was stylish and liked her a tomboy style. Tayson was ambivalent about being female and had some concerns related to pregnancy when she was older, because the physical aspect did not sound appealing to her. The concept of motherhood was intriguing to her, as she had thought of adopting children as an option someday.

Tayson's concept of ADD and anxiety did not intersect with gender. She felt that her male peers were wired differently compared to most girls her age, but this was separate from ADD and anxiety. The boys were usually loud and obnoxious, while the girls were more laid back or appeared shy. At the follow up meeting she talked about being bisexual, and that she was out with her family about her sexuality. Tayson did not notice any connection to bisexuality and having ADD, anxiety, or Asperger's.

Socially, Tayson felt that girls tended to engage in more drama, which Tayson disliked. She had an experience in middle school when rumors were spread about her by another girl. Sometimes she felt that the other girls were saying things behind her back. However, she did not attribute her experience with drama to her identification as a person with either ADD or anxiety.

4.32 Tayson's Summary

Tayson learned social skills through taking the Exploration class with Mr. Miranda, which was required of all students in 9th grade at her school. Mr. Miranda was her favorite teacher that year and she felt comfortable approaching him with questions to help her socially throughout the remainder of the year. She enjoyed that much of the class was personally relevant to her. Learning through role plays and personal, experiential discussion was an effective pedagogical tool for her. Tayson determined specific social skills on her own that she wanted to work on at school. As a result of taking the class she realized she wanted to work more on being aware of the presence of others in her immediate surroundings whenever she was disclosing sensitive information to a friend. She did not want to create drama with her friend group and understood drama as a manifestation in groups of girls.

Tayson had issues with some teachers and feeling restricted when she wanted to talk with her friends, or use her phone to listen to music, which helped her focus. She enjoyed writing and her LA teacher had encouraged her to have high expectations for herself. Along with being in disruptive environments, Tayson experienced much anxiety at school. She often felt scared and angry at the other students. It was hard for her to meet and make new friends. The school did not do much to support her anxiety. Even though she liked her school she wanted to look into attending another, smaller school that would be more supportive of her needs. Tayson was not receiving school-based supports with meeting and making new friends. Her school accommodations were related to her academic achievement.

Several long-term friendships had been cultivated by Tayson over the years. She had relationships with these friends, both in and outside of school. When she had a group of friends with her, she had a higher likelihood of doing well in her classes

and feeling comfortable. Tayson struggled to meet new people on her own. She had recently met her boyfriend, who was a new person to her, so in certain instances it was possible for her to meet new people at school. Her friends tried to help her with her social anxiety and she had casually disclosed to them that she had ADD. However, it was important to her to appear normal so that an incorrect disability label was not given to her by the other students.

Tayson did not identify as an autistic person and did not like the term autistic, as it was used in a pejorative way by other students in her school. This resulted in her rejection of identity first language. Tayson identified as a person with ADD. Her understandings of ADD came from her personal experiences, casual conversations at home with her mom, and through some online research completed on her own. Aside from the Exploration class she did not have opportunities to talk about having anxiety or ADD with anyone, or what it meant to have these conditions. She also had not talked with anyone at school about having Asperger's and did not really understand it at all. All of this added up to Tayson not being able to be effective with advocating for the things she needed to be successful at school and make school a place that was less stressful for her.

4.33 Conclusions

In this chapter I presented my interpretation of Maia, Ninja, Ernie, and Tayson's experiences with social skills instruction and use at school. The social skills classes encompassed the gamut of ways social skills could be taught. Their schools and the culture within each site afforded all of them very different kinds of opportunities for socialization. Identifying as autistic was also conceptualized differently among each student as they had varying levels of understanding of their

labels. They connected how being autistic or neurodivergent affected their social life at school. They provided deep introspections on their gender, autism, and relationships with people at school that led to unearthing much about what it was like for them at school.

I purposefully chose the sequence of this analysis to start with Maia, moving on to Ninja, then Ernie, and concluded with Tayson. This was done to highlight Maia and Ninja's experiences with a segregated social skills class for autistic students only. Conversely, I wanted Ernie and Tayson's experiences with curricular-based social instruction available to all students to be displayed one after another. I also wanted to group Maia, Ninja, and Ernie sequentially as the students who identified as autistic. Tayson stood apart from the other students in having an Asperger's label and she did not identify or understand the meaning of this label. She was neurodivergent, however, because she identified with ADD and anxiety and she gave valuable contributions to the aims and scope of this study.

The highlight of undergoing this analysis was the in-depth view on the role social skills played in the school lives of the young women in this study. They took the process of learning social skills with rigor and took on the task of independently working on their social skills. While unraveling their experiences much about their sociocultural life at their schools and connections to their views on autism were explored. My thoughts on this exploration are discussed in detail in the final chapter that follows.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this concluding chapter I discuss insights that I learned from Maia, Ninja, Ernie and Tayson[3] and seek to reflect on their experiences learning, using, and interpreting social skills at school from their perspective as neurodivergent young women. They discussed their experiences using social skills across social contexts with a variety of peers and adults, both in and out of school. The interactions also influenced their conceptualization of their autistic or neurodivergent identity. This chapter will be structured by, first, a brief reflection on the concept of social skills. Second, I discuss findings related to the two research questions. Third, I shift to an intersectional discussion encompassing both points of inquiry. Fourth, several key implications for practitioners will be discussed, followed by scholarly and theoretical contributions, limitations, and conclusions.

5.1 Social Skills and Socialization

Before proceeding to discussion of findings related to the research questions, I want to reflect on the term "social skills" and how it has been applied throughout this study. At the outset, it was my intention to learn about the experiences of undergoing

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[3] Since Tayson did not identify as autistic, when I discuss aspects of these experiences related strictly to being autistic this refers to the three students who did identify as autistic. When I identify areas related to neurodiversity, and neurodivergence, this is in reference to all of the students.

social skills instruction, and perhaps observe how the students apply what they learned throughout their time at school. However, the experiences with using the skills they learned at school were much more robust than the use of one or two "skills". The term "skill" in particular here implies the learning of specific concepts. This study is actually about the *socialization* practices of these four students, which encompassed their deep reflections and introspections of their relationships and navigation of their social world with regard to their neurodivergent identities. I am unable to distill their experiences to merely skill development. These students' experiences are much more than an interrogation of a skill.

Additionally, the term "social skill" implies a medical model intervention, where this is a skill the students are asked to learn in order to meet a chronological developmental social milestone. It is not my intention to deconstruct where the students lie on a developmental timeline. This exploration was beyond that of an isolated skill adhering to a developmental model of what they should and should not be learning at this stage in their lives. While I wanted to learn more about their experiences with this instruction, I also gathered what it was like for them to be social in general. As these autistic young women navigated their daily lives at school, I learned much about the components that made up their social worlds. Moving forward with this discussion chapter, I want to keep in mind these varying contexts of social skills and the meaning embedded within using this terminology.

5.2 Learning and Using Social Skills at School

My first inquiry sought to explore the perspectives of the students as they experienced learning and using social skills in high school. This question was broken into two areas asking how they interpret and make use of social skills instruction and

also asking to know more about how their school-based experiences contributed to how they learned and used social skills. In inquiring about their experience with social skills at school, much about their understanding of socialization and how and when socialization occurred at school was discussed and explored.

The students' perspectives on social skills offered insights on how they were learning, using, and constructing social skills throughout their school day. The girls had a holistic consideration of social skills instruction. They understood exactly how they learned social skills and gave thorough analysis of the pedagogical methods used by the teachers. I observed their introspective understandings and reflections of what they wanted to learn and how they learned it best. Once taught to them, these students were engaged in purposeful practice of social skills, a practice of socialization that they both realized on their own and with the guidance of the social skills class – that they wanted to apply with people they saw at school and home.

The young women placed value on aspects of their time in social skills classes. When they were in their social skills class, they related to the skills that were most relevant to their lives and valued learning social skills that they could apply in their real-life contexts in order to practice on their own. Upon reflection of what they learned, some of the young women (e.g. Ernie and Tayson) realized that they appreciated the skills they initially thought they already knew. They realized there was still much to learn, particularly when there were opportunities to then apply that skill in a realistic context. For the most part, the girls went about practicing a social skill at school on their own, one that they valued and was relevant. Sometimes this practice occurred with the additional encouragement of their friends or teachers.

Another area of value applied in their social skills classes were the teaching strategies. They described which activities and assignments were most constructive to learning social skills. Largely, the activities that encouraged them to engage with the social skills and deconstruct how and when it is best applied, like a role play or discussion, were the methods that they enjoyed the most. This value is connected to their understanding of the dynamism of social skills, that the teaching of it requires deconstructing the skill and understanding the best application of the skill. This led to their attempts at application of the skill on their own.

Friendships and peer relationships were important to them for socialization, both in and out of school, in person or online. Their friends comprised of other teenagers and young adults who were autistic (but did not identify as female), neurodivergent, disabled, and no label. They understood the way they socialized was different from other students and navigated their difference while maintaining social relationships with friends, teachers, and school staff. The relationships based on understanding and trust were the most valuable to them. This value on being understood is consistent with other qualitative studies discussing the role of friendship for autistic youth and young adults (Snosnowy et al., 2018; Honeybourne, 2015)

They also realized when they did not like being around specific peers, notably boys. For all of these young women, when they were in the presence of some of the boys in their classes, they did not like them, because they were loud or the things they said were considered to be obnoxious. Ernie felt that many boys did not display empathy. This highlights why they needed to be understood by peers in general in order to get along. They recognized that they were not going to be able to foster reciprocal relationships with their peers who did not demonstrate some empathy and

understanding of differences. At the same time, they did not seek out relationships only with peers who were young woman. These young women were interested in friendships with both male and female peers at school, as long as those peers demonstrated understanding and empathy toward their differences.

Additionally, group work was a struggle for each of the girls, unless they were placed in groups with friends. With regard to the value on feeling understood, Ninja and Tayson spoke to a lack of respect by peers when they worked in groups. Their teachers did not always display understanding, as their lack of direction for choosing groups backfired. Similar to the participants' accounts of group work in a qualitative study by Honeybourne (2015), the autistic girls here were often left without a group and required teacher assistance to group them with other students. This turned an academic socialization opportunity into a problematic social situation where these autistic young women felt socially isolated, rather than supported.

The students were in the process of becoming more aware of how others perceived them. This occurred as they were independently trying to be more aware of how they were perceived by others. In turn, they embarked on some emotional work while going through the process of their own social skill development. For example, Ninja wondered if the other students thought she was antisocial and puzzled on why the other students did not like her. The girls displayed emotion as they told me about their successful and failed attempts with socializing with teachers, adults, friends, peers, and boyfriends. Undergoing this emotional labor on a daily basis was taxing, however they desired relationships with people at school and continued to foster social connections.

Each student experienced their instruction and learning in varying contexts. Despite the differences, the students all came away from their social skills experiences with a sense that they needed to learn these skills, because they were set apart from the neurotypical and non-autistic students and understood they were different in how they interacted with others. Social skills class was one way for them to understand how to navigate their interactions. Through dynamic teaching strategies, lessons that were valuable to them, and practice of their skills with peers, teachers, and school staff, they engaged in learning specific social skills and they introspected on their own socialization traits.

5.3 Social Connections to Constructing Identity

My second query sought to know how learning social skills contributed to the students' constructions of their disability or autistic identity. In my exploration of the findings from this inquiry I found that the students experienced being "othered" while they were at school. This led to masking their autistic traits and mannerisms to pass and conform to be more like the other students who were not autistic. When girls and young women are purposefully not engaging in autistic mannerisms it is difficult to determine if they are autistic (Tint & Weiss, 2018). Masking has been observed in autistic girls and young women and is often regarded as part of the rationale for their underdiagnoses of autism (Lai et al., 2017).

The girls also struggled with conceptualizing what it meant to be autistic or neurodivergent. Almost all of the information they learned about autism or neurodiversity came from their own independent research on the topic. Taken all together and relating back to their social skills experiences, the girls' perspectives on their autistic identity was intertwined with their social lives; their histories with

socializing, who they socialized with, and what was implied about autism in their social skills classes,

Notably, the students' histories with peers deeply affected their autistic identity. Over time they realized they were set apart from the other students, usually through negative interactions. Instances of bullying when they were younger had lasting social impact on them. By the time they reached high school, each of these young women understood they were not "normal" in comparison to their friends and peers who were not identified as autistic. While they did not all engage in putting on a mask to act as if they were not autistic or neurodivergent, they engaged in passing behavior, even when they were comfortable with their identity. At the extremes of masking and passing were Maia and Ernie. In Maia's case she was directly taught in her social skills class the concept of masking, which she embodied as she put forth efforts to hide her autistic tic. Ernie, who felt the most comfortable expressing herself as autistic in her school, where many of the students were neurodivergent, admitted her recent awareness of her autistic traits and attempts to hide them.

Their masking and passing behavior led me to reflect about the impact of the dominant pathological paradigm on their sense of what it means to be autistic. While they did not feel that autism needs to be fixed, and Maia and Ernie noted several positive aspects to being autistic, there was still the understanding that they were markedly different from their non-autistic peers. Insofar as regarding the other students as "normal" and themselves as not normal, they attempted practicing conforming to neurotypical social standards. While they did not directly ascribe to an understanding that being autistic required remediation, they felt the need to still attempt to fit in with the dominant culture.

In terms of their autistic identity, their struggle to identify autism and salient aspects related to autism like neurodiversity or self-advocacy is a reflection of the lack of dialogue about these aspects of autism. The most notable aspect of how socialization affected their view on their neurodivergent identity was in the absence of discussion at school about autism with friends and teachers. Unlike their social skills lessons, they had not been directly taught about autism. These young women were afforded opportunities to complete independent research on the topic, but without the consistency of the benefits of guidance or in-depth discussion, like they experienced within social skills classes.

The term *misfit*, coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2011) continually occurred to me throughout the course of this study. *Misfitting* refers to how the environment of an individual with a disability is embodied and lived in a temporal-spatial sense. The misfitting concept is used here to unearth connections to the educational environment and autistic identity at school. The autistic young women in this study experienced a misfitting as they were positioned as one of the only autistic female students who identified in their social skills class or school. They deeply felt a sense of disconnection from a community that they wanted to know more about, but was continually out of reach for them at school. Along with being a girl amongst boys, they were also misfitted by virtue of being autistic. They felt that they were perceived as different and it was a matter of social acceptance by their friends and teachers that helped them feel less of a sense of misfit while at school. Despite social connections, they were physically misfitted through their unmet sensory needs. Ninja's continual struggle with sensitive hearing, Ernie's yelling, Maia's food and talking, and Tayson's music listening, were all aspects of their school day where the sensory component of

being neurodivergent was not supported and led to their physical and sensory misft in their school environment.

According to Forber-Pratt and Zape (2017) connection to disability community is a key component to disability identity. With regards to autistic identity, Ernie, Ninja, and Maia expressed wanting to know other autistic girls and women. This was the highlighted component of gender for them. These autistic students desired more community with other autistic girls and women. Tayson, who did not identify as autistic, stood out from this desire, as she did not seek to know others with her labels. However, she was completely unaware of what her Asperger's label meant. While her other labels affected her daily life she did not talk about them as a meaningful aspect to her relationships with her friends – her labels were not a key aspect to her relationships. Tayson's companionship with another female friend also labeled with ADD provided her with a friendship experience unique from the others, because she was with one other person like herself when she was at school.

5.4 Broad Reflections

I want to further discuss two components that were highlighted throughout the entirety of this study which related to both research questions. I start here with reflections on gender and then move on to introspection. The gender component was one area I found to be of interest to explore further, as these young women had varying views of the impact of identifying as a young woman at school, and their notion of how, or if, there was an intersection with being neurodivergent was surprising to me, as it was in disjuncture with how the research literature conceptualized gendered experiences. The second area was how the students in this study underwent their own introspection and reflection of their experiences. Much of

what we talked about was deeply meaningful to them and it struck me as an area to further explore, because these introspections led to their understanding about their social relationships and the back and forth dialogues that occurred in school and classroom contexts.

5.4.1 Gender

The research literature discusses a need to learn more about autistic girls and women who identify as female with an aim toward intersectionality of understanding autistic perspectives from a specific female lens (Mandy & Lei, 2017; Saxe, 2017; Lei et al., 2015; Shefcyk, 2015). It was interesting to discover that there was a separation between gender and autism from the perspectives of the students in this study. They viewed gender and autism to be distinct constructs. The autistic young women felt that autism affected each person differently at an individual level. Meanwhile they felt that their gender, largely, did not have much to do with the experience of being autistic.

Ernie stood apart from the others in her description of how she intersected autism with gender by expressing her embodiment of her gender was representative of being autistic. While she understood the sociocultural construction of gender and identified herself beyond the gender binary, she did not speak to the other socially constructed aspects to the intersection of autism and gender, such as being the only autistic young woman in her school or her view on interactions with her peers. This section will continue with discussion on how these intersections played out in their experiences.

The girls hinted at how the experience of being the only autistic girl in their social skills class, or school, was a salient component of their autistic experience at school. However, they were hesitant to identify their gendered isolation as an

intersectional quality to their autistic and female experience. To the students in this study, while it was understood they were the only autistic girl in their social skills class/school, they did not find that to be remarkable in terms of intersecting autism and gender.

The experience of being (one of) the only autistic young woman in their social skills class had a lasting impact on the students who identified as autistic. While Maia, Ninja, and Ernie highlighted this experience, it did not surface when they discussed gender intersecting with autism. Meanwhile, one of the hallmarks of being an autistic girl is the understanding of the gender disparity. These young women identified the gender disparity in their own experiences, but did not find it to be a lasting component to their understanding of being both autistic and identifying as female. They were intrigued that I was interacting with other autistic girls for this study, who were their ages, and all expressed a desire to attend a girls only social skills class. Commiseration on their experiences was a key aspect to understanding more about themselves. As Ninja expressed, "Well. I would like to meet other girls with autism. […] cause then I might learn something about autism, you know." However, they did not identify this as an aspect that was of intersectional importance to their experience of being both a girl or young woman and being autistic.

Their interactions with their male peers were another area where they did not identify an intersection with being autistic. While they thought that many of the boys in their classes were loud and undesirable to be around, there were specific instances when the girls struggled with marginalization through their autistic socialization and interacting with male students. Notable were Ninja and Maia's experiences with non-autistic male students. Ninja was called a "bitch" by a male student and felt that some

of the boys she knew at her school were “perverted.” Maia was subjected to years-long taunting by a group of boys in her grade. These instances are problematic from the perspective of gendered norms of socializing. However, being autistic, and being marked further for this difference creates an additional layer of oppression to their already marginalized position within the school.

In their interactions with the only other autistic students in the school, who were mostly male, they also indicated that those social moments were less than desirable. Ninja felt that her views were not as respected in the social skills class, along with realizing that she was consistently waiting for them to stop talking in order to promote her perspective. While Maia got along with many of the boys in her social skills class, when they were hanging out outside of class, she felt the need to defer the conversation to their preferred topics. This was surprising to learn from Maia, as she was extraordinarily talkative and assertive in her perspectives when we were together.

Autism does not shield these students from the sociocultural impact of gender. At the public high school level, it is rare to have a class make up of boys as the majority and girls as the very minority. There is much to consider about the arrangement with female students as the minority in any situation throughout their education. In any circumstance where there are more male students than female students gendered dynamics will occur. In the case of Ninja, she did not feel respected by the male classmates. When Maia engaged with her autistic classmates outside of class, she consciously did not vocalize her interests. In these instances, Maia and Ninja were further misfitted in their school environment, highlighting how their gender impacted their relationships with the only other autistic students that they knew in the school. These are examples of gendered components to consider when female students

are placed in male dominated settings. Modern day society is rife with patriarchal cultural production that positions women with disabilities at the margins (hooks, 1984). The experiences of Maia and Ninja demonstrate how the culture of deference to or feeling of disrespect by male peers can start early for autistic girls placed in settings with majority male counterparts.

Ernie on the other hand, with her feminist stance on how she lived her life, consciously protected herself as much as possible from patriarchal cultural constructs. She was picky in her interactions with the boys in her school, choosing only to befriend the ones who demonstrated empathic capacity. In her view, the young men who could demonstrate empathy were the only ones she could get along with, due to her clear differences in communicating and socializing with her friends and peers. Ernie positioned herself with the knowledge of how she felt about the young men in her school and attempted to live out her feminist philosophical ideals.

Another observation of an intersection between autism and gender was how they felt about and embodied being young women. Maia, Ninja, and Tayson were not enthused about their gender. Meanwhile, Ernie enjoyed women and the concept of her own womanhood. At the same time, Ernie's presentation of gender was non-binary, appearing as a small boy from a distance. Ninja and Tayson identified as tomboys but did not consider this to be a salient aspect to being neurodivergent and a woman. While Maia embodied being more traditionally socioculturally feminine from the way she looked and the things she was interested in, she was also not enthused about her gender. These findings align with a recent study by Cooper, Smith, and Russell (2018), which concludes autistic adults who identify as female have a higher

likelihood of having low self-esteem associated with their gender as well as reporting themselves as more masculine than neurotypical women.

Additionally, they expressed concerns with pregnancy as a female issue. This physical embodiment of being a woman reflected their understanding of their female biology and one possible outcome for that body once they are sexually active. Indeed, In the minds of most teenage girls who are sexually active is the concern about pregnancy. While these young women did not state concern in the present moment, they had thought about the possibility one day of their bodies becoming pregnant, and, at this time in their lives, decided that it was not a biological component they wanted their bodies to undergo. The concept of motherhood however, was different from pregnancy, as Tayson spoke about adopting children someday and Ernie expressed she liked being around children, but was uncertain if she could care for them. Identifying discomfort with biological changes was separated into a distinct womanly concern that autism did not affect.

While they talked about these components of gender, I found it difficult to find ways to ask about intersections of gender and autism. While they all expressed the desire to learn social skills in an all-girl classroom, and (Tayson aside) wanting to be with other autistic girls and women for commiseration and experience sharing, they did not state how those were manifestations of being autistic too. Additionally, talking about their discomfort with biological components of being female was not considered an aspect to being autistic as well. While the research literature and autistic adult experiences highlight these aspects as intersectional understandings of autism, for Maia, Ninja, Ernie and Tayson, at 14 and 15 years old, these were not considered intersectional aspects of being female and neurodivergent.

Tayson's understanding of knowing of her Asperger's label, but not identifying with it, adds some complexity to her experience. This lack of identity with autism occurs frequently due to the masking behavior that autistic youth who identify as female master in order to fit in with their peers (Sandland, 2018) For Tayson in particular, with the term "autistic" being stigmatized by students in her school, she did not want to be identified as autistic. It is common for autistic girls and young women to be mislabeled, and then through their masking efforts they experience high levels of anxiety and depression (Bargiela, Steward, & Mandy, 2016). Through not understanding her Asperger's label, Tayson's experience is representative of a common phenomenon that occurs with autistic women diagnosed as autistic in adulthood. Her experience with social anxiety fits with this profile of what often happens to autistic young women who do not know they are autistic. Her perception of Asperger's, and her non-identity with it, provides some information on the impact of identity with autism on the autistic experience, regardless of the awareness of the label or not.

Autistic people tend to embody gender as either along a non-binary spectrum, or as a nonentity (George & Stokes, 2018; Davidson & Tamas, 2016; Jack, 2014). Davidson and Tamas (2016) provide some clarification on the intersection of autism and gender with their application of a ghost metaphor to describe the autistic perception of gender:

> Since our earliest conversations on the subject [of gender], we've been aware of and increasingly bothered by the sense of gender as a ghostly presence/ absence ... something that autistic accounts reveal to be there, but not really; something that slips in and out of their awareness, that's felt to circulate around but never quite settle in their lives, or on their bodies, and never shapes their interactions in quite the way it's supposed to.(p. 61)

There are recent accounts of the connection for how autistic people's understanding of autism supports their understanding of gender. In Kourti and MacLeod's (2018) retrospective accounts of adult autistic females the participants describe how as they grew older their tendency to mask being autistic was affiliated with masking their true gender identity. Many of the participants identified as tomboys when they were younger, and then grew to better understand the intersection of gender and autism. In taking a look back, the participants realized that as they matured, they realized learning more about their autistic identity supported their gender identity. Similarly, at the ages of 14 and 15, the young women in this study had not made explicit connections between their identification with female gender and being autistic.

5.4.2 Introspection

Relationship building between autistic students and their teachers can be difficult. As Conn (2018) discusses, there is often a strained relationship between teachers and autistic students, because the interrelationship interactions needed to relate to autistic students is different from the set of interactions used for non-autistic students. It can be difficult for the teachers to work on how to apply successful interrelationship interactions their teaching practice. Both Maia and Ninja experienced strained relationships with their special education case managers - the teachers with the most expertise in autism.

All of the young women discussed how there was a general struggle with their teachers building relationships during the school year that we completed the study. In addition to Maia and Ninja's issues with their special education teachers, Tayson and Ernie had their own struggles. Tayson disliked her special education case manager. Ernie did not feel supported academically by Stanley in U.S. History (likely due to the

school's issues with attrition of a special educator to support the teachers as well as the students). In all of these instances, the students were thoughtful in articulating the problems the experienced with these teachers. Most of their issues resided in not feeling understood or respected. Maia expressed when her teachers understood her, and she was allowed to be herself, then she could be comfortable in their class. This led to usually enjoying those classes more than other classes.

The students engaged in deep reflection and introspection of how they desired to learn social skills and their learning in general. When the teachers used interesting elements to their teaching, like humor, incorporating hands-on activities, and time to socialize, the students were happier with their time in those classes. Notably, the pedagogical methods applied by the teachers were eloquently articulated and analyzed for their own successes and challenges by each student. Across all of their experiences, the students identified and highlighted the activities that assisted their learning of social skills, as well as academic content.

The relationship building needed by the teachers to support the students in academic socialization was a key observation in these experiences. Conn (2018) discusses how teachers must reflect on and re-consider how their interactions with autistic students are different from neurotypical students. The interpersonal skill building will be fundamentally different from the interpersonal skills used with neurotypical students. Teachers who understand how autistic students socialize and who understand concepts related to autistic sociality (Ochs and Solomon, 2010) were the most successful in building relationships with their students.

A behavioral/developmental model of viewing autism was evident in the schools, which was observed in how these students spoke of their navigation through

the school buildings. The girls talked about different ways their bodies were restricted throughout their day by various teachers and adults in the school building. Each student expressed difficulty with maintaining their bodies as autonomous and agential. These restrictions were related to their individual autistic mannerisms. Maia expressed she did not want to abide by the rule that she must sit next to another person during resource class and lunch. For the others, this manifested in their discomfort, as their sensory needs were not consistently met in their schools. Tayson was not allowed to listen to music through her phone. Ninja was not allowed to go to the bathroom. Ernie's yelling had no accommodations aside from gentle reminders from teachers and friends to be quiet. For Maia and Ninja, their restrictions led to power struggles with the adults, as they attempted to self-advocate what they needed to be successful. These restrictions of where their bodies can and cannot go in the school were related to being autistic, as it was their autistic mannerisms that were the means for the restriction. This restriction led to a misfit (Garland-Thompson, 2011) of their bodies in their schools.

In each of these instances of the students introspecting on how they develop relationships with their teachers and how their bodies were restricted by either their teachers or their school set up, it was illustrated how their autistic inclinations were fostered or were behaviorally determined to require some intervention assistance. The behavioral interventions, like sitting with a partner or regulating sensory stimulation, resulted in restricting not only the girls' bodies, but also dampened, if not silenced, their voices. They were well aware of which accommodations would work best for them and the adults often did not listen to their needs at first. When framed from the perspective of restricting bodies and silencing their voices, the marginalization they

faced at school on a daily basis comes to surface. They expressed their capability, and then their discomfort, with restrictions and awareness of their misfit. Alternatively, Ernie's case can be used to demonstrate how fostering self-advocacy with her teachers and having deep, connected relationships led to her autonomy being respected by her teachers. While she did not have a dedicated space in her building for supporting her sensory needs, she was controlling what she needed with regard to her yelling impulse by asking her friends and teachers to help her regulate her voice while she was at school.

5.5 Implications

The implications of the findings and the observations discussed in this chapter traverse the pedagogical methods for teaching social skills and move on to unearthing understandings related to autistic adolescent well-being at school. My intended audience for these implications is practitioners, because they are working daily with autistic youth and can engage in meaningful reflection on their practices. I am also speaking to implications for future research efforts to be completed in collaboration among scholars, practitioners and autistic youth.

Since the start of this study's literature review phase, I was intrigued about school as a site for identity development. The amount of time spent at school, as well as the spillover components of school to life outside of school, has much impact on students. Keeping this in mind, special education teachers must engage in frank discussion with their students about disability. As students are embarking on understanding themselves, learning the basics about their disability, will have long lasting effects on how they identify with their disability (Linton, 1998). Early findings from the *Paths 2 the Future* curriculum study reveal that adolescent girls' awareness

about gender and disability increase when it is directly taught in a girls-only classroom context (Lindstrom et al., 2018). A greater understanding of disability identity can be taught and have meaningful impact to the students.

Particular to autistic students, conversations and active lessons about different models of disability, the neurodiversity movement, autistic history, autistic activism and models of understanding autism should be discussed with them. They should be exposed to other autistic people, aside from the other autistic students at school, with mentorship programs put in place when possible. Mentorship both for autistic adolescents to engage with autistic youth younger than themselves, and mentorship by fostering relationships between autistic adults in the community with autistic adolescents. This is particularly important for autistic youth who identify as female. Without knowing many other autistic girls or women, they do not understand how their experience is both the same and different from male-identified autistics. It is important for autistic girls and young women to understand they are far from alone and that there are others who have similar experiences to their own. Without this community component, autistic youth and adults feel a sense of isolation and feel the need to increase their passing behaviors in order to have relationships with the non-autistic people around them (Milton & Sims, 2016). The plethora of autism narratives and blogs provides much information about autistic and neurodivergent experiences are one place to start learning about these experiences, if in-person or online community supports are not available.

Friendship is important to autistic youth. They want and desire friendships with all kinds of people. The friendships that last are the ones where non-autistic peers understand their nuanced autistic mannerisms and accept them for who they are.

(Sosnowy, Silverman, Shattuck, & Garfield, 2018). Much can be done at the school level to support autistic students. School-wide efforts targeting the neurotypical teachers and students in understanding neurodivergent populations is one component. This would support neurodivergent and neurotypical students when there are group work expectations in their classes. Instruction about disability, the social model, disability activism, and inclusion in schools and communities are one step toward the greater student body becoming more understanding toward their disabled and neurodivergent peers (Danforth, 2014).

Milton and Sims (2016) describe accounts of well-being in autistic adults. There were many similar issues of well-being occurring with the young women in this study. This indicates that the mechanisms to support autistic well-being start in high school, or earlier, and they are not being taught how to live in a neurotypical world with a good sense of well-being. In particular, the concept of social isolation and passing overlapped with the experiences described by the students in this study.

Trainor's (2017) discussion of health as a domain in transition education suggests that the well-being of students as they undergo transition throughout their high school years should be an area that is fostered, rather than ignored. The students in this study all self-identified as having either a form of depression and/or anxiety along with their neurodivergent labels of autism or ADD. When situated in a context of supporting neurodivergent students' well-being at school, the impact of navigating through the neurotypical landscape of schools needs to be better understood by the teachers supporting autistic youth. The stakes are high for their long-lasting well-being and positive autistic identity development.

Self-determination is a component in transition literature that overlaps with social skills instruction. Activities geared toward self-determination have aims for supporting students with disabilities to build the skills to support their independence after high school (Trainor, 2017). Autistic students are not as autonomous in the application of self-determination strategies as other peers with disabilities, due to the socializing and communicating components that are difficult for autistic students to complete (Chou, Wehymeyer, Palmer, & Lees, 2017). Trainor (2017) contextualizes self-determination within a sociocultural model based on the types of Bordieuan capital, like social and cultural capital. While this is the aim of many transition practices, there is a cost for students undergoing social skills instruction. The girls in this study were faced with learning social skills and neurotypical socialization procedures to help them gain cultural and social capital. Then they will need to apply these social skills and the (hopeful) capital they have built when they are beyond the public-school system. However, the girls were not explicitly told that this was the purpose of teaching social skills. Instead of understanding the broader reasons for learning social skills at the sociocultural level, they were taught social skills at an individual level. The girls' internalization of social skills resulted in passing and conforming behavior. Social skills instruction should encompass discussion of passing and masking, not in the direction to wear a mask, but in supporting them to understand when and why they may desire to conform, if at all. This will help them understand the role social and cultural capital has in their lives and they can choose if masking and disclosing autism is the best choice for them, depending on the circumstance.

I want to resist the temptation to point toward a simple intervention that would be a "catch all" in supporting autistic students, instead I offer an alternative viewpoint.

While there is a focus on autistic students learning social skills, it should be mentioned that in actuality most students and people are in the continual process of learning social skills throughout their lifespan. They determine the appropriate skill for the occasion on their own. Neurotypical people undergo this without much assistance, however autistic people require additional support to understand how to navigate through a neurotypical world. This should not be at the cost of understanding and identifying with being autistic. Rather, I propose that by having a solid foundation in what it means to be autistic, autistic students can then move forward in understanding that they will be viewed differently by neurotypical people and then they can make choices as to how they want to work within their individual contexts.

On the other hand, schools in particular are sites for inclusive supports. By involving the whole school in supporting and understanding students who are labeled as different, or who are a minority population, the entire school population and greater community benefits from this venture. This provides a ripe environment for autistic students in particular to grow into understanding how autism is perceived by neurotypical students, as open conversations about differences lead to unearthing realizations about different populations. Conversely, neurotypical students and teachers come to understand all forms of human diversity and learn how to accept and work with one another. In this context, a marriage between the autistic student understanding themselves with relationship to the neurotypical population supports the neurotypical population in turn though understanding the autistic students and their unique needs.

5.6 Scholarly and Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to autism scholarship through an interdisciplinary focus. While other studies have completed interviews with autistic teenage girls (e.g. Rainsberry, 2017; Honeybourne, 2015; Cridland et al., 2014) this study is unique in the contribution to understanding the particular experience of undergoing social skills instruction in the first years of high school. Additionally, the findings of this study make contributions to our understanding of the intersection of gender and disability categories in schools and then seeking to understand how that contributes to understandings of gender as experienced by autistic young women. The study extends the quantitative work on gender understandings of autistic people between the ages of 16-80 years old completed by Cooper, Smith, and Russel (2018) by seeking to understand gender qualitatively from the perspectives of autistic adolescents. There has been emerging qualitative study on understanding gender and autism from the perspectives of autistic women (Kourti & MacLeod, 2018). However, this study makes a further contribution through seeking to understand gender from the perspectives of autistic adolescents. Not all contributions from this study are unique. Similar to Rainsberry (2017) and Cridland et al. (2014) the findings revealed the importance of teacher relationships, sensory issues at school, and friendships to autistic adolescent young women. This research also echoes Sandland's (2018) findings and assists with better understanding of the masking phenomenon.

This study made contribution to the theoretical frameworks of feminist disability studies and critical autism studies. The concept of *misfitting* is a recent understanding of the material-discursive nature of how bodies move in and within environments. Initially discussed by feminist disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thompson in 2011, this theoretical concept has not been widely applied to

school contexts. In this manner, the notion of disabled young women's bodies in schools experiencing a misfit, that is intersected directly with both their gender and their disability, is an area where this study extends this emerging feminist disability studies theoretical concept.

Another area that is not often discussed within the context of schools is critical autism studies. As a newer framework that is undergoing continual evolution of the theoretical components, there is much room for use of concepts related to critical autism studies across contexts. Through the discussion here of how the girls experienced various restrictions and were often silenced by the existing structures of power within the school system, this study expands on the use of critical autism studies in schools. Additionally, in development of a literature review that was purposeful in discussing the history of autism and use of the words of autistic scholars as well as autistic advocates and activists in order to understand autism from the perspective of autistic people, was another contribution. This autistic perspective was connected to the school system with the understanding that there is a critical context to autism, to the experiences of autistic students and schooling, that has not yet undergone extensive scrutiny.

5.7 Limitations

I want to acknowledge that autism is experienced differently depending on the person and has been conceptualized as a spectrum. When autistic people are labeled, the DSM-V asks the diagnostician to determine a level of functionality. The notion of "high" and "low" functioning has been hotly debated in autistic communities, and in ascribing to the neurodiversity paradigm I will not comment on a functioning level the young women in this study experienced. It should be noted however, that they did not

ask for, or seem to require, any additional communication supports during our interviews. Tayson stated she preferred to talk to her friends over text message, however she decided to verbally talk to me for her interviews. Each of these students were included, for large parts of their school day, in the general education curriculum and spaces in their schools.

The students in this study do not represent the entire autism spectrum. Although we did not discuss at length about their preferred method of communication, they all chose to complete the interviews in person and communicated via talking with me. None of the students identified themselves as having intellectual disability, and it was not stated elsewhere by their parents upon consent. During the recruitment process, I told people who could assist with recruitment that I would work with students who used alternative forms of communication and who had other disability labels in addition to autism. To me, it was a coincidence that the young women who were in this study experienced being autistic in school in a manner where they were provided with similar educational placements (e.g. they were included in their local school and either fully included in the general education curriculum or were provided with special education accommodations supports throughout the school day). To this end, the experiences discussed in this study focus on autism from the perspective of students who are provided with these kinds of special education supports and environments, rather than the experience of autistic students who are in more or less restricted placements.

In this study I wanted to highlight the words of the students, of their individual experiences, and what they knew to be true of their world. This resulted in my own questioning at times of the importance of knowing certain facts (e.g. some students did

not know the contents of their IEP, or the kinds of special education services and supports provided to the students). In order to navigate this issue, I continually went back to the research questions and asked myself if that information was necessary in this analysis of their individual experiences. While I was able to gain an idea of the school and classroom contexts, I was clear in my interview with the teachers that I did not want to discuss the student participating in the study. This was to establish trust with the student that I would not divulge information they disclosed to me to their teacher. In this commitment to the experience, and to the idiographic particular, I do not know for certain several components of the girls' school experiences. This is a limitation of the IPA method, as it is known to be a research method that is concerned with unearthing and understanding an experience, taking great care with the interpretation of how that experience occurs from the perspective of the participant. In order to navigate this limitation, I found that there was great importance in the direction of the research questions. The research questions are asked in a purposeful manner in order to unearth the particular about the phenomenon under question, which were then asked in the interview series. I found that the students in this study sufficiently described the phenomenon of learning and using social skills in school as well as social connections to autistic identity development, which was what I had attempted to achieve from the outset.

Another limitation is the lack of discussion around whiteness, how it is constructed, and that it became a taken-for-granted component throughout this study. Whiteness was not centered and only briefly discussed. As stated in the methods section nearly every person I interacted with was read to be racially white, based on both skin color as well as the relative ease of the interactions with the individuals.

These interactions were comfortable for me due to my own whiteness and being able to interact easily within the dominant white culture. The space for discussion about how whiteness supported these students in their social skills endeavors was not engaged in as part of this current work. It should be acknowledged that as white people the students in this study were growing up within the dominant culture, attending predominantly white high schools, and had been around the social skills required to survive within white culture. While they still struggled to understand socialization, had a student of color participated in this study an additional layer to understanding social skills instruction would have been unearthed. An autistic student of color might have had to interrogate instruction in (white) social skills as well as whiteness. This is an area for future study as much still needs to be understood about how autistic students of color understand learning (white) social skills.

Conclusions

This study was meant to serve as a springboard to learn more about the diversity of autistic experiences at school. The medicalization and pathologization of autism have led to a dearth of qualitative exploration of autistic experiences, particularly the school experience. Areas of future research might include understanding the social skills experiences of autistic youth of color, at the intersections with other marginalized identities, and their experiences in different regional contexts of urban, suburban, or rural. Also, after the follow up interviews and observing how their perceptions changed from one school year to the next depending on the contexts of their school and the new people in their lives (e.g. Tayson and Ninja were in romantic relationships, more girls were enrolled in Ninja's class, both of the teachers Ernie was close with left the school) a longitudinal study throughout several years of high school would reveal much more about these experiences, along with accounting for maturation over time. Study about the autistic adolescent male experience with socializing would be beneficial to learn about their understandings of socializing at school and how that impacts their autistic identity.

The process of untangling the experiences of Maia, Ninja, Ernie, and Tayson continually reminded me to return back to my initial wonderments that brought me to this work. During a practicum course, I observed and noticed the impact of grassroots autistic communities in Southeastern Pennsylvania and Northern Delaware. This was a response to the need for bringing together families and autistic youth and adults to share common experiences and commiserate with each other. I observed how they

needed to talk about their experiences with bullying, keeping employment, and making friends with others who understood how different life was like as an autistic person. They expressed to me that these autistic community spaces were important for friendships outside of school with other autistic people. I connected this to the concept that students are undergoing social skills instruction, as per the IEP goals and objectives, at school, which indicated there was potential to know other autistic students. However, it appeared that these autism communities developed in schools were not enough for students, since they were seeking out other autistic groups outside of school, and I wanted to explore this further.

At the same time, I wondered if autistic students were being taught how to conform to neurotypical social standards and realized that practitioners and researchers were not aware of what autistic students thought of social skills instruction. In particular, absent of other discussion about autism or neurodiversity, I wondered how students think about undergoing instruction that, at its essence, asks autistic students to try their best to step away from their autistic social inclinations to learn how to conform to the dominant neurotypical way of socializing. While this has a terrific purpose of supporting autistic students as they age to understand and navigate the neurotypical world, additional support to understand autism itself, and how to identify- positively- with autism, with being autistic, needs to happen concurrently. These initial wonderments brought me to this work. I now leave this work with much learned, and much to offer to the community of practitioners and scholars who are working with autistic students, particularly those interacting with autistic girls and young women.

The heart of this study lies in relationships. How relationships are built up or broken down at school, the need for relationships with teachers and friends, and the impact those relationships have on student identity. Relationships are important to autistic students. However, they must be relationships that are fostered in understanding how they are different from neurotypical people and accepting their unique autistic qualities. Autistic students are pigeonholed into trying to fit into a neurotypical school world. Acceptance of who they are by the study body, friends, and teachers would help them foster successful skills to navigate through this world. Maia, Ninja, Ernie and Tayson's voices highlight the need for practitioners to assist with this misfit into a neurotypical landscape through teaching about sociocultural constructs related to disability, autism, and gender, as well as understanding of salient aspects of being autistic, such as learning about the neurodiversity paradigm and movement and the efforts made by autistic activists.

The words of Maia, Ninja, Ernie, and Tayson – the heart of this work – will make the final contribution here as they provide their insights on what it like for them at school or their perspectives on being autistic:

Maia

> I kinda wish [teachers] understood about my attitude. They're kinda similar to the students, but the teachers don't pick on me. They kinda just try to help me understand. But I've had favorite, whenever I have a favorite teacher, I talk nonstop to them. It's kind of an issue I have. I wish I didn't have that issue, but every time I have a favorite teacher I kinda talk a lot to them.
>
> …And like different autistic people. How we're not all just one body. We're like, we're just new, we're all different too. But we're not just like the same as everyone else like, neurotypicals think we are. We're all just different. We all have different personalities. We're all different mindsets. Different personalities.

Tayson

> [being a girl in special education] doesn't really change much about me. I mean, I act like a normal person, like, well now how do I say that? I act like everyone else who, like, doesn't have the type of conditions that I have. And, like, no one really notices that I have those sorts of conditions, so it's kind of hard to tell that I do.

Ninja

> … but I don't consider autism a disability. Depend on, well in my case I don't consider it a disability. I mean different like, different like, different levels of autism maybe it can be, maybe it can cause some like, some kind of, ah, disability, but really depends on like the level of it. Um, spectrum. (pause) But, usually, I don't think it's a disability.

Ernie

> Spongebob probably is [autistic]. You can look at him. Just watch an episode. You'll understand.
>
> Autism, as explained by some people, say, you are wired differently. As the kids say! Which means our brains are, just aren't the way, like, someone else's is. So, we have different reactions to different things and, like, different traits that would, like, isn't, what are normal, as the kids also say, […] So, if we have different, like, experiences, we can see things in a different way. As you'd assume… So, it's kinda like a fresh new perspective. And sometimes we can see it in a different light than others. And like, that's actually useful information, thank you. And we say no problem. We're here for you. and then it's pretty nice and we go for tea after.

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Appendix

Appendix A

DSM 5 AUTISM CRITERIA

Diagnostic Criteria for 299.00 Autism Spectrum Disorder

A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):
    1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
    2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
    3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understand relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

Specify current severity: **Severity is based on social communication impairments and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior.**

B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):
    1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
    2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme

distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).

3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).
4. Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g. apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).

Specify current severity:

Severity is based on social communication impairments and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior.

C. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).
D. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.
E. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay. Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level.

Note: Individuals with a well-established DSM-IV diagnosis of autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, or pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified should be given the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. Individuals who have marked deficits in social communication, but whose symptoms do not otherwise meet criteria for autism spectrum disorder, should be evaluated for social (pragmatic) communication disorder.

Specify if:

With or without accompanying intellectual impairment. With or without accompanying language impairment

Associated with a known medical or genetic condition or environmental factor

Associated with another neurodevelopmental, mental, or behavioral disorder

Appendix B

RECRUITMENT FLYER

Doctoral Dissertation Project Summary
Title: *A phenomenological study of the school-based social skills experiences of adolescent autistic girls*

Dates: September 2017 – April 2018

Description: The purpose of this doctoral dissertation project is to better understand the experiences of learning social skills at school from the perspective of autistic females in high school. To help me learn about this experience, 3-4 autistic teenage girls and I will work together to find out about their perspectives of learning social skills at school. The students in this study will meet with me throughout the 2017/18 school year for interviews, and will be invited to present about their experiences at the Oregon Statewide Transition Conference.

Participants:

- Participants in this study will include 3-4 autistic females between the ages of 14-21.
- They must attend a high school program
- Have either a medical or educational label of autism
- Receive social skills instruction while at school. This social skills instruction may occur formally or informally.
- They will need to answer the interview questions and use expressive and receptive communication skills. I will work with each student to accommodate her individual communication needs and students who communicate verbally or who use alternate communication systems beyond, or in addition to, verbal communication can participate in this study.
- Additional participants include school personnel such as teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, or school administrators, who will be asked to complete 1 interview with me during the fall of 2017.

Study Data:

- The study will collect data from several sources including: interviews with the participants, notes taken from in-class observations, parent/guardian questionnaire, photographs, and schoolwork.
- Interviews with students can take place outside of school hours. Some of their teachers and school personnel will be asked to have one interview with me. All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed.

- Each student will be observed during social skills instruction or during a social activity at school up to 3 times.
- The students will be asked to take digital photos of places or things around their school that have social meaning to them.
- I will ask the teachers to provide me with some assignments they have completed in school that reflect learning a social skill, which I will discuss with the student.
- All of the names and locations of the individuals and schools participating in this study will remain confidential in any publications or presentations that result from this research.

School Sites:

- All of the participants must attend a high school program. The participants in this study can be from the same school or from different schools.

- The participants can receive any amount of special education services while attending school.

About Me: I am Marisa Kofke, M.Ed., and a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Delaware in the School of Education. Due to a spousal job opportunity, we moved from Southeastern Pennsylvania to Portland in June 2016. During the 2016/17 school year I worked with the team at the University of Oregon as a member of the P2F study. My background includes working in Pennsylvania at the secondary level as a special education teacher, social skills coach, and behavioral specialist. Throughout my doctoral studies I noticed that much of the existing social skills research does not attend to the experience of learning social skills at school. I would like to contribute to this gap in the research with the completion of my dissertation study.

For questions about participation in this dissertation study email me at mkofke@udel.edu.

Appendix C

PARENT CONSENT FORM

University of Delaware IRB Approved From: 11/01/2017 to 06/12/2018

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH Parent/Guardian Questionnaire and Consent for Minor Form

TITLE OF PROJECT: A phenomenological study of autistic female adolescents' perspectives on school-based social skills experiences

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR: Marisa Kofke

You are being invited to participate in a Ph.D. dissertation research study. This consent form tells you about the study including its purpose, what you will be asked to do if you decide to take part, and the risks and benefits of being in the study. Please read the information below and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether or not you agree to participate.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of teenage girls with autism who are learning social skills at school. To help me learn, I will interview 3-4 teenage girls about their experiences. I will ask you as their parents/guardians to complete a questionnaire about social skills your daughter is learning at home and school, as well as some questions about disability identity. Also, I will interview some of the girls' school staff about their schools.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?

Your school is sharing information about this study with parents/guardians of teenagers who have been given a diagnosis of autism at school, is between the ages of 13-21, identifies as female, attends high school and received social skills instruction at school. You and your daughter would be excluded from this study if your daughter no longer met these requirements.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

For you:

For one part of this study you will be asked to provide responses to the attached parent/guardian questionnaire. This should take you about 20-30 minutes to complete. You may return this questionnaire to Marisa Kofke anytime between now and January 15, 2018 with the provided self-addressed, stamped envelope or it can be completed online at your leisure. I will email you the online link upon request.

Additionally, you will be asked to provide consent for your daughter to participate in this study. There are a couple things that will be asked of your daughter:

o She will meet with me (Marisa Kofke) a couple times over the school year.
▪ 1 introductory meeting where I will answer her questions about the study. This should take about an hour.
▪ 3 one-on-one audio-recorded interviews. Each interview will last about one hour. ▪ 1 follow-up meeting for me to clarify what we talked about in the interviews

University of Delaware IRB Approved From: 11/01/2017 to 06/12/2018

____1. I give permission for my daughter to :

____ (a) be interviewed and observed for this study, and
____ (b) participate in the Oregon Statewide Transition Conference presentation.

____ 3. I agree that all of the information collected may be used for a research study. No information would be shared that would identify me or my daughter as an individual.

Your signature on this form means that: 1) you are at least 18 years old; 2) you have read and understand the information given in this form; 3) you have asked any questions you have about the research and the questions have been answered to your satisfaction; 4) you are giving consent for your daughter's participation in this study; and 5) you accept the terms in the form and volunteer to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

____2. If my daughter gives her assent to be interviewed, I would be willing to complete the parent questionnaire.

_____ Printed Name of Participant

_____ Name of student participant

_____ Person Obtaining Consent

(PRINTED NAME)

_____ Signature of Participant

_____ Person Obtaining Consent

(SIGNATURE)

_____ Date

_____ Date

Please provide the best way for Marisa Kofke to contact you for follow-up on participation in this study: Phone:
Email:

OPTIONAL CONSENT TO BE CONTACTED FOR FUTURE STUDIES:

Do I have your permission to contact you regarding participation in future studies? Please write your initials next to your preferred choice.

_____ YES _____ NO

Appendix D

PARENT/GUARDIAN QUESTIONNAIRE

Parent/Guardian Questionnaire

Please set aside about 20-30 minutes to complete this questionnaire about your daughter and autism. You may write as much or as little as you would like and may skip questions if you choose not to answer them. Use the back of the paper if more space is needed for responses. Completing this questionnaire is entirely voluntary and your answers will not be shared with anyone. Email Marisa Kofke with any questions: mkofke@udel.edu or call XXX-XXX-XXXX.

1. First Name of parent/guardian competing questionnaire:
2. Relationship to the student participant: Circle one
    a. Parent
    b. Mother
    c. Father
    d. Grandparent
    e. Guardian
    f. Other: Please describe

    _____
3. When was your daughter diagnosed with autism and who made the diagnosis/label?

4. What brought on or led to the autism diagnosis/label?
5. What was your initial reaction to the autism diagnosis/label?
6. How has your perspective on, or how you view, autism changed since she was diagnosed/labeled?
7. Have you talked with your daughter about her autism diagnosis/label? If you have, what is her understanding of autism? If you have not talked with her about autism, has anyone else?
8. Have you talked with your daughter about social skills? If so, what kinds of social skills have you talked about recently?

9. Do you work with your daughter on learning social skills at home or in the community? If yes, please describe how (e.g. using a social script, discussion of social expectations while at an event).
10. What kinds of social skills or activities to promote social skills do you work on together?
11. Does your daughter go to any extracurricular program or recreational activity - with the purpose of learning social skills - with other teens or young adults who do not have autism?
12. Does your daughter go to any extracurricular program or recreational activity with the purpose of being with other teens or young adults who also have autism?
13. What does your daughter like to do in her free time?
14. What kinds of things do you like to do as a family, or with family and close friends?
15. What kinds of things do you like to do with your daughter - just the two of you?
16. Have there been any notable successes or challenges with your daughter at school?
17. What does your daughter want to do after high school? Do you think that she will be able to fulfill her postsecondary goals?
18. How was the transition to high school? Was there any particular reason that your daughter is attending her school?
19. What do you anticipate for the transition after high school is over? (e.g. will she live with you, go to college, be employed).

THANK YOU – Please put your responses in the envelope and seal for confidentiality.

Appendix E

STUDENT CONSENT FORM

University of Delaware IRB Approved From: 11/01/2017 to 06/12/2018

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
Title of Project: A phenomenological study of autistic female adolescents' perspectives on school-based

social skills experiences
Principal Investigator: Marisa Kofke Introduction

My name is Marisa Kofke. I am a graduate student at University of Delaware. I am asking you to participate in a study. This form tells you what the study is about, what you will be asked to do if you want to be in the study, and the possible risks and benefits about this study. Please read and ask me any questions you have.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of girls with autism who are learning social skills at school. To help me learn, I will interview 2-4 girls about their experiences and observe them at school. I will ask their parents to complete a questionnaire about what their daughters are learning at school. Also, I will interview some of the girls' school staff about their schools and may ask for schoolwork samples if they are related to social skills or disability identity.

Why have you been asked to participate in this study?

You identify as a female, have been diagnosed with autism, go to high school and have received social skills instruction at school. I want to know what you think about learning social skills at school.

If you agree to participate in the study what will you be asked to do?

There are a couple things that will be asked of you:

o You will meet with me (Marisa Kofke) a couple times over the school year.

- ▪□□1 introductory meeting where I will answer your questions about the study. This

  should take about an hour.

- ▪□□3 one-on-one audio-recorded interviews. Each interview will last about one hour.
- ▪□□1 follow-up meeting for me to clarify what we talked about in the interviews
- ▪□□If you choose, there will be an opportunity for you to share what you have learned

  about social skills in high school with the other study participants in a presentation at the Oregon Statewide Transition Conference, a professional conference in Portland, on March 1, 2018, but you do not have to do this if you do not want to. If you want to go to the conference we will meet beforehand to talk about your role in the presentation. This should take about an hour.

o I will observe you at least 1 time at school, preferably when you are in a social situation, or completing a social skills activity.

o I will ask you to take photos of areas around your school that have meaning to you socially and we will discuss the photos in one of the interview meetings.

o I will ask you about schoolwork samples that you teacher shares with me, which are related to social skills or disability identity and we will discuss your work in one of the interview meetings.

What are the risks of being in this study?

There are no direct risks to you. During the interviews with me you may feel some discomfort if you experience anxiety or embarrassment when talking about yourself. Some school personnel will know that you are participating in this study, but what you and I talk about will be private.

If you choose to participate in the professional conference presentation then your information will not be private. This could lead to some discomfort or anxiety if you are talking about experiences you normally would not share with others. The other participants or people at the conference may want to ask you questions. It will be your choice to answer the questions or not.

What are the benefits of being in this study?

There are no direct benefits. However, sometimes talking in interviews like these can be a rewarding experience, because it is an opportunity to learn more about yourself.

if you choose, you will have the opportunity to work on your presentation skills during the Oregon Statewide Transition Conference.

Also, the information gained from the study may help teachers, families, and other girls with autism learn more about teaching and learning social skills in school.

What will you be given to compensate for your time?

You will be given a gift card to a local store or restaurant of your choosing after each interview. Each gift card will have at least a $25 value. There will be drinks and snacks available every time you meet with me.

How will things be kept private?

- •□□The records of this study will be kept private (lock and key or password protected). I will make every effort to keep all research records that identify you confidential.
- •□□In any type of report I write, I will not include your name or anyone else's or any other identifying information such as hometown, school, etc. We will create code names instead.
- •□□The findings of this research may be presented or published. If this happens, no information that gives your name or other details will be shared. The information provided in the interview may be quoted in the final publication, however your real name will not be attached to it. Your

photographs of your school, and schoolwork samples shared with me by your teacher may be used

in publications or presentations to professional audiences for educational purposes only.

- ●□□The only people who will hear your interviews or read the transcripts with any identifying

  information with be you and I, and I may hire a professional transcriber.

- ●□□If you choose to participate in the professional conference, you will first talk with me to know more

  about the potential risks and benefits involved in sharing your information.

- ●□□People at your school will know that you are participating in this study, as I will be observing you at

  school and you may participate in activities that require school permission, such as taking photos of the school, or I may ask your teacher to share some of your schoolwork with me. The information we talk about when we meet will not be shared with anyone at your school. I will try my best to make sure that no one can identify you in any written report or presentation.

- ●□□Research records, including the audio recordings and photographs will be destroyed within 3 years.
- ●□□The confidentiality of your records will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your research

  records may be viewed by the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board, which is a committee formally designated to approve, monitor, and review biomedical and behavioral research involving humans. Records relating to this research will be kept for at least three years after the research study has been completed.

- ●□□Also, you must know that if during your participation in this study the research team was to observe or suspect, in good faith, child abuse or neglect, then Delaware state law obligates a report to be filed to the appropriate officials.

What if you choose not to take part or leave the study?

- •□□Your participation in the interviews and in the professional conference is voluntary. You have the choice to do the interviews and the conference, or not. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your relationship with the University or me.
- •□□You are free to stop participating at any time, for whatever reason.
- •□□There is no penalty or consequence for not participating or for stopping your participation.

Who can you contact if you have any questions or concerns?

•□If you have any questions about the study and want to talk about it before you agree to participate you can contact me, Marisa Kofke, by phone or email: Phone: (XXX) XXX-XXXX. Email: mkofke@udel.edu

- •□□If you would like to contact my advisor to make any comments or ask any questions, you can email Laura

  Eisenman, Associate Professor, University of Delaware, at eisenman@udel.edu

- •□□If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of

  Delaware's Institutional Review Board at hsrb-research@udel.edu or (302) 831-2137.

  To show that you received and understand the information on this form, do three things:
  (1) put your initials at the bottom of the each page;
  (2) read the statements below and put your initials on the lines next to the ones that are true for you;

Participant's Initials _____

(3) sign and date the form at the bottom of this page.

Your parents have given permission for you to participate in this study if you want to. It is your choice. Put your initials next to the ways you would like to participate.
___ 1. I agree to be interviewed. The interviews will be audio-recorded.
___ 2. I agree to be observed at school

___ 2. I would like to participate at the Oregon Statewide Transition Conferece.
___ 3. I agree that all of the information collected may be used for a research study. No information would be shared that would identify me as an individual.

Your signature on this form means that: 1) you have read and understand the information given in this form; 2) you have asked any questions you have about the research and the questions have been answered to your satisfaction; and 3) you accept the terms in the form and volunteer to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

_____ Printed Name of Participant

_____ Person Obtaining Consent

(PRINTED NAME)

_____
Signature of Participant Date

_____
Person Obtaining Consent Date

(SIGNATURE)

_____

_____

Please provide the best way for Marisa Kofke to contact you for follow-up on participation in this study: Phone:
Email:

OPTIONAL CONSENT TO BE CONTACTED FOR FUTURE STUDIES:

Do I have your permission to contact you regarding participation in future studies? Please write your initials next to your preferred choice.

_____ YES _____ NO

Form Rev. 01/2017

Participant's Initials _____

Appendix F

SCHOOL PERSONNEL CONSENT FORMS

University of Delaware IRB Approved From: 12/07/2017 to 06/12/2018

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
TITLE OF PROJECT: A phenomenological study of autistic female adolescents' perspectives on school-based social

skills experiences

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR: Marisa Kofke

You are being invited to participate in a Ph.D. dissertation research study. This consent form tells you about the study including its purpose, what you will be asked to do if you decide to take part, and the risks and benefits of being in the study. Please read the information below and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether or not you agree to participate.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of teenage girls with autism who are learning social skills at school. To help me learn, I will interview and work with 3-4 teenage girls to learn more about about their experiences, observe each participant at least once at school during a social skills class or social situation, and ask the students to take photographs of areas around their school that have a social meaning to them. For each participant I will ask 3 school personnel to complete an interview with me about social skills experiences at your school and ask some questions about the school's culture. If you are the student's teacher I will also ask that you share with me schoolwork samples about social skills or disability identity completed by the student who is participating in the study.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?

You are personnel in a school the study participant(s) attends. You would be excluded from this study if you are no longer school personnel, or if one of the participants in your school leaves the study.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

As part of this study you will be asked to provide responses to questions during 1 audio-recorded interview with me. This should take you about 60 minutes to complete. You may schedule your interview with me at a time and place that is mutually convenient for both of us between the months of November 2017 – June 2017. I will also ask for you to share any schoolwork samples about social skills or disability identity completed by the student who is participating in the study. I may ask to temporarily keep the schoolwork and discuss it with the student. The schoolwork will be returned to you afterward.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

There are no direct risks to your participation in the interview. There is a chance that you may experience discomfort by increasing your level of stress, or you may feel sadness, as you think about some of the answers.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS?

There are no direct benefits. However, sometimes completing interviews like these can be a rewarding experience, because it is an opportunity to learn more about yourself.

Also, the information gained from the study may help teachers, families, and other teenage girls with autism learn more about teaching and learning social skills in school.

HOW WILL CONFIDENTIALITY BE MAINTAINED? WHO MAY KNOW THAT YOU PARTICIPATED IN THIS RESEARCH?

- •□□The records of this study will be kept confidential and private (lock and key or password protected).
- •□□In any type of written report or presentation, your name will not be included along with anyone else's or any

  other identifying information such as hometown, school, etc. Code names will be created instead. The research team will make every effort to keep all research records that identify you confidential. The findings of this research may be presented or published. If this happens, no information that gives your name or other details will be shared. The information provided in the interview and student schoolwork samples may be quoted in the final publication or presentation, however your real name will not be attached to it.

- ●□□The audio recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer in an encrypted file. They will be destroyed within 3 years. Marisa Kofke and a trained, professional transcriber will be the only individuals to listen to the recordings. The professional transcriber will not have access to your real name.
- ●□□The confidentiality of your records will be protected to the extent permitted by law. Your research records may be viewed by the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board, which is a committee formally designated to approve, monitor, and review biomedical and behavioral research involving humans. Records relating to this research will be kept for at least three years after the research study has been completed. Research records will be destroyed within three years.
- ●□□Also, you must know that if during your participation in this study the research team was to observe or suspect, in good faith, child abuse or neglect, then Delaware state law obligates a report to be filed to the appropriate officials.

USE OF DATA COLLECTED FROM YOU IN FUTURE RESEARCH:

The research data we will be collecting from you during your participation in this study may be useful in other research studies in the future. Your choice about future use of your data will have no impact on your participation in this research study. Do you give permission to use in future studies data collected from you? Please write your initials next to your preferred choice.

_____ YES _____ NO WILL THERE BE ANY COSTS TO YOU FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS RESEARCH?

There are no additional costs associated with participating in the study

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION?

There is no compensation

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

Taking part in this research study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to participate in this research. If you choose to take part, you have the right to stop at any time. If you decide not to participate or if you decide to stop taking part in the research at a later date, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

University of Delaware IRB Approved From: 12/07/2017 to 06/12/2018

Your decision to stop participation, or not to participate, will not influence current or future relationships with the University of Delaware.

In the event that the participant from your school is no longer a participant in this study, then your participation in this study will also be terminated.

If, at any time, you decide to end your participation in this research study, please inform Marisa Kofke at the contact information provided below.

WHO SHOULD YOU CALL IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

- ●□□If you have any questions about this study, please contact the Principal Investigator, Marisa Kofke at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or mkofke@udel.edu
- ●□□If you would like to contact Marisa Kofke's advisor to make any comments or ask any questions, you can email Laura Eisenman, Associate Professor, University of Delaware, at eisenman@udel.edu
- ●□□If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Delaware's Institutional Review Board at hsrb-research@udel.edu or (302) 831-2137.

  Your signature on this form means that: 1) you are at least 18 years old; 2) you have read and understand the information given in this form; 3) you have asked any questions you have about the research and the questions have been answered to your satisfaction; and 4) you accept the terms in the form and volunteer to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

_____ Printed Name of Participant

_____ Person Obtaining Consent

_____ _____ Signature of Participant Date

_____ _____ Person Obtaining Consent Date

OPTIONAL CONSENT TO BE CONTACTED FOR FUTURE STUDIES:

Do I have your permission to contact you regarding participation in future studies? Please write your initials next to your preferred choice.

_____ YES _____ NO

Form Rev. 01/2017

Participant's Initials _____

Appendix G

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

These are open-ended questions, which are intended to promote a discussion

Interview 1 will be about school in general and getting to know the student

1. Can you describe your school? What is your school day usually like? What do you do at school?

2. What are 3 things that you like the most about your school?

3. What are 3 things that you don't like about your school?

4. What are the main differences between a good day and a bad day at school?

5. Are you involved in any kinds of clubs or extracurricular activities?
    a. At school
    b. Outside of school
    c. Why are you in this activity? How long have you been doing it?
    d. How did you hear about this activity?
    e. What do you think of this activity?

6. Would you make any changes to how your school day goes?
    a. If yes- what kinds of changes?
    b. If no- ask to explain further- (maybe refer to the answers from question 2)

7. Do you have a favorite class?
    a. What do you like about it?

8. Do you have a class that you dread or a class that you don't like that much?
    a. What don't you like about it?

9. What do you like to do in your free time?
    a. What are your hobbies? Interests?

b. Things you do on the internet/social media pages that you follow/games/manga/anime/comic books/music/movies/TV

10. What's something that you are proud of/accomplished?
    a. That's related to school
    b. That's not related to school

11. What's something that is really hard for you to do?
    a. That's related to school
    b. That's not related to school

12. How do you usually feel after school?

13. How was school when you were younger?
    a. In elementary school/grades 4-5/when you were around 8-10 years old
    b. In middle school/grades 6-8/when you were around 11-13 years old

14. What do you think your teachers think about you?

15. What does going to school mean to you?
    a. What does it mean to you to go to school?

16. What do you think your life will be like next year?
    a. In 5 years?
    b. In 10 years?
17. Do you think there's a question about your school that I should have asked? What question would that be? If you could ask the other participants in this study a question about their school what would it be?

Schedule the next meeting and explain the photograph activity. This is an activity where they will get to take photographs of areas around the school that they like and then we will talk about them. If needed show her an example photograph of something at the school: "this doorway is important to me, because it leads to the room where you have social skills class. I also met your teacher for the first time in this room, etc." Note with the participant if there are any constraints on when they are allowed to have a camera/phone out at school to take the photographs. They can use photo apps or programs to make artistic alterations to the photos.

Interview 2 will be focused on social skills at school and being female. Discussion of the schoolwork samples and the photographs will take place during this interview.

1. Just to clarify from the last time we had an interview…

a. Engage in any follow up questions that require clarification

Let's rewind a couple months for you, and talk about your time in the Social skills Class. Can you tell me about that class?

- What was your favorite activity
- How was your teacher
- How were the other students
- You overall impression of that course

2. Let's break this down to social skills only. To make sure we are talking about the same thing – can you tell me what you consider social skills to be? What are social skills?
    a. Confirm we are talking about the same thing and agree upon a common term indicating the process of learning social skills – social skills, socialization, social therapy, etc.

3. Where are you learning social skills at school?
    a. If autism is mentioned: ask – what is it about autism that makes you need social skills class at school?
    b. Social skills class
    c. Anywhere else- with any other teachers, is it in your IEP?

4. How do you learn social skills at school? (for participant 1 see question 2)
        i. Is it a class? How often do you meet? Who is the teacher?
        ii. Are there other kids in that class/session with you?
        iii. What kinds of things do you do in that class/session? Note: Use the term that they use to describe it.

5. What do you think of those classes/sessions?
    a. Do you like them? What do you like about them?
    b. What has been your favorite activity or lesson? Why?
    c. What is something that you don't like about them?
    d. What lesson or activity did you really not like doing? Why?

6. When it comes to social skills, what kinds of things are important to you?
    a. Why is/are (the social skills stated) important to you?
    b. What do you think will happen when you work on (the social skill stated)?

7. Are there other girls in your social skills class/session?
    a. How many?
    b. Do you get along/are you friends?

c. Do you have classes together?

8. Do you ever have social skills classes that are just for the girls?
    a. If so, what do you talk about?
    b. Why do you meet together just as girls?
    c. If not: What do you think of having social skills classes/session with boys and girls together?
    d. What kinds of things do you think you would talk about if it was a class that only had girls? How would it be different from the other class that has boys and girls together?

9. Your teacher gave me some of the assignments that you completed in your social skills class (or other special education transition class). *Show the student the work sample(s) and ask these questions for each one.*
    a. Do you remember this activity? What was it like for you to complete it?
    b. What did you learn during this activity?
    c. How did this activity impact what you know about social skills?

10. Let's take a look at the photographs you took. (*As we go through the photographs ask this set of questions)*
    a. What is this a picture of?
    b. Why did you choose to take it?
    c. What does this area of the school mean to you/what is its significance to you?
    d. Do you talk to others when you are here? Why/why not?
    e. Is this a special place for anyone else?

Interview 3 will be about autistic identity and culture. The photographs and schoolwork samples will be discussed again in this interview.

1. The last time we talked, we spoke about social skills and looked over your photographs. We will be looking over them again later today.

2. I am interested in knowing some more of your thoughts about autism. The last time we only talked a little bit about autism. Do you remember what we talked about then? I did not ask at that time, but am wondering if you have a preference for being referred to as "autistic" or as "a person with autism"?
    a. If there is one: Why the preference?

3. What does having autism/being autistic mean to you?

    a. What does it mean to have autism/be autistic?

4. Can you name the top 3 things that you like the best about having autism/being autistic?
5. Can you name the 3 things about having autism/being autistic that you don't like, or that frustrates you?

6. Do you have any other friends with autism/autistic friends?
    a. If yes: How did you meet? What do you do together?
    b. If no: Is there a reason why?
    c. Would you like to have friends with autism/autistic friends?

7. Have you read any books about other people with autism/autistic people?
    a. If yes: Which ones? What were they about? What did you think? Why did you read them?

8. Have you seen any shows or movies with characters with autism/autistic characters?
    a. If yes: Which ones? What were they about? What did you think? Why did you watch them?

9. Do you remember when you were told that you have autism/are autistic?
    a. What was that like for you? How did you feel at the time?

10. Do you know any autistic adults or anyone with autism that is older than you? Younger than you?
    a. Is it/could it be helpful to you to know them?
    b. How do you know them?
    c. What kinds of things do you do together?

11. Do you participate in any types of autism only clubs, organizations or communities, either in person or online?
    a. Or activities that happen to have a lot of autistic people in them?
    b. If yes: What made you want to participate in that activity?
    c. If no: Why? Are there any reasons you are not involved in activities with other autistic people?

12. If she does not seem to have connections with many other autistic people:
    a. Do you have a chance to hang out or talk with other autistic people?
    b. What do you think of autistic people?

13. If she does have connections with other autistic people:
    a. What do you think of autistic people?

b. Is it important to you to know others who have autism?

14. Let's review these assignments once again that your teacher gave me.
    a. Do you think there is anything about this that is about autism? If so, can you explain it to me?

15. Let's take one more look at the photographs that you took last time. *(As reviewing the photographs ask these questions for each photograph)*
    a. Do any of these have importance to you, because of your disability/because of autism? Why/why not?

Appendix H

SCHOOL PERSONNEL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Questions for Secondary Participants

These are open-ended questions for the school personnel, which are intended to promote a discussion. This is entirely voluntary.

Interview 1

18. Let's talk about your position at this school.
    a. What do you teach?
    b. How long have you been here? How long have you been teaching?
    c. Have you changed positions/pivoted throughout your career?

19. Discuss a mutual definition of "social skills"
    a. "When I say social skills I am referring to instruction in learning how to socialize- do you have another definition?"

20. How about you tell me about the classes you teach? The Social Skills class- what is the name for it?
    a. How long teaching it
    b. Central components and overriding philosophy of the course
    c. How did you come to be the teacher for this course?
    d. How's it going teaching this course?
    e. What are the top things that you enjoy about teaching this course?
    f. What suggestions would you give to your superiors about this course?

21. What are your thoughts on teaching social skills?
    a. How do you plan this class?
    b. What kinds of activities do you usually do?
    c. Where do your materials for this class come from?
    d. How often does the class meet, how many students, do the students change every semester or year?

22. What is the student's general response to this course?

a. How do students with social issues, like students with autism, adhd, or anxiety, respond to this course? Is it different than the response of students without those labels?

23. How do you think your students feel about the more directed social skills components of the course?

24. Is there anything like your course for students to take later on?

Now we are going to talk about the special education program at this school.

25. Are you familiar with the special education programming here?
    a. In this district?
    b. What is it like? Can you give me an overview of the types of services student receive here?
    c. In what ways do you participate with kids who receive special education services and supports?

26. What are 2-3 things about the special education program that you feel are well done/feel could be worked on at this school or district?

27. What kind of programs are available for students with autism?

28. Does this school engage in activities throughout the year to celebrate diverse populations, like kids with disabilities, LGBTQ, multicultural and/or immigrant awareness?
    a. If so, what are your thoughts about those activities?

29. Are there opportunities for students with disabilities to learn about socializing from students without disabilities outside of your course?

30. Opportunities for general education students to work with autistic students?

31. What do you think about the socialization opportunities for students with disabilities in this school?
    a. Why kinds of opportunities are there?
    b. Are kids with disabilities included in activities with kids without disabilities?
    c. Are there opportunities for the students with disabilities to participate in the clubs and/or extracurricular activities? Do you know if they take advantage of this?

    d. What is the most popular club/extracurricular?

32. What are your thoughts on the use of the phrases “person with autism” versus “autistic person” or the use of person-first language? Do you have any experiences with this?

33. Do you know, or know of any autistic advocates? How did you hear of them? What do they advocate for?

34. Are you familiar with the term “neurodiversity”? What does it mean to you?

This next series of questions is about your more general thoughts about the school

1. What do you think your students like the most about this school?

2. What do you think your students would change about this school?

3. What kinds of activities do you enjoy engaging at as part of your work here?
    a. Collaborating with other teachers
    b. When students work on a long-term goal
    c. Working with parents/caregivers

4. Are you involved in any kinds of clubs or extracurricular activities with the school?
    a. What interests you about this activity?
    b. What brought you to this activity?
    c. What kinds of kids are drawn to this activity?

5. Would you make any changes to how your school day goes?
    a. If yes- what kinds of changes?
    b. If no- ask to explain further- (maybe refer to the answers from question 2)

6. What are 3 relative strengths of this school, from your perspective as a teacher?

7. What are 3 suggestions you have that would improve things here?

8. And finally- which 3 words (or phrases) would you use to describe this school?

Appendix I

IRB/HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

RESEARCH OFFICE

210 Hullihen Hall
University of Delaware
Newark, Delaware 19716-1551
Ph: 302/831-2136
Fax: 302/831-2828

DATE: May 29, 2018

TO: Marisa Kofke
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: [1037940-6] A phenomenological study of autistic female adolescents' perspectives on school-based social skills experiences

SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: Approved for Data Analysis Only
APPROVAL DATE: May 29, 2018
EXPIRATION DATE: June 12, 2019
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # *(7)*

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Please report all NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this study to this office.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years.

Based on the risks, this project requires Continuing Review by this office on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate renewal forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Farnese-McFarlane at (302) 831-1119 or nicolefm@udel.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.