Autism and Internationalised Schools: The Search for a Socially Just Education in the People's Republic of China

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Abstract

This thesis uncovers the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools are capable of providing autistic students with a more socially just education. This notion of a socially just education is taken from a critical disability understanding of social justice that has not been employed in China. Evidence has indicated that autism remains misunderstood in China and that autistic people have fewer life and educational opportunities. Currently, autistic students are excluded within Chinese public education and research has found that non-traditional learners such as autistic people may be better supported in the under-researched internationalised school sector. It is important, therefore, that a developing school system that has the potential to support autistic individuals be evaluated through a disability centred framework. Twenty participants (10 autistic students and 10 internationalised schoolteachers) participated in qualitative semi-structured interviews. These interviews were used to inform the thesis research question. In an original contribution to the field of autism educational research in China, this thesis is the first to investigate the empowering nature of Chinese internationalised schools and if they can or cannot provide a socially just education to autistic students. Furthermore, this research adds to the limited number of qualitative autism studies in China and distinguishes itself by being one of, if not the first, study to truly include the voices of autistic teenagers. Ultimately, this thesis finds that Chinese internationalised schools are incapable of providing autistic students with a more socially just education for several reasons including political control of the education system and the existence of a Chinese Confucianist understanding of education that permeates throughout society. Findings have implications for education within China, Chinese internationalised schools, autism education worldwide, and the recognition that evaluative frameworks that centre disability and the needs of autistic people do exist and can be utilised in various contexts.

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Acknowledgements

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Author’s Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. No sections of this thesis have been published or submitted for a higher degree elsewhere. This thesis is not the result of joint research.

Jonathan Hay

Chapter 1: Introduction

This doctoral thesis investigates the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools can provide students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (henceforth referred to as autism) with a more ‘socially just’ education. Within the People’s Republic of China, disabled people are viewed with sympathy and pity and, resultantly, receive fewer life, employment, and educational opportunities (Stein, 2015; Zheng et al., 2014). This reality that disabled people in China face extends to autistic children who are found to have an impaired quality of life because of them being autistic in China and prevented from accessing a meaningful education (Liu et al., 2016). This thesis seeks to make an original contribution to the field of autism education within China by drawing upon the experiences of autistic students enrolled in the burgeoning Chinese internationalised school sector as well as directing attention to the structure of these schools, the power dynamics within them, the attitudes of teachers towards those with autism, and the ethos of these schools in relation to neurodiversity and the development of a neurodiverse educational community that currently does not exist. It will identify how capable Chinese internationalised schools are of providing for autistic students by focussing predominantly on the experiences and perceptions of the students themselves rather than on the more common-place non-autistic viewpoint that does not represent the beliefs or the interests of the autistic community (Pellicano et al., 2014). Whilst this thesis is concerned with the education of autistic students in the Chinese context, one must remember that autistic students around the world continue to be stigmatised and receive an education that frequently fails to cater to their needs and inadequately prepares or recognises them as citizens who deserve to participate in society (Obeid et al., 2015; Shah, 2001; Tipton & Blacher, 2014). Consequently, the findings reported in this thesis may have wider implications that are applicable beyond China and that could inform practice around the world. Before these issues are investigated empirically, it is important to begin this introductory chapter by offering some contextual background information, specifically the wider Confucian attitude towards disabled people in Chinese society. Although this thesis is specifically addressing autism, the legal classification of autism as a disability means that shedding some light on how Confucian thought and, by extension, Chinese society, views disability is essential in understanding the current position of autistic people in the country. This introductory chapter will also draw attention to the current gap in research literature and will highlight the scope and aims of this doctoral thesis. Finally, the structure of the thesis will be outlined both for the purposes of clarity and to allow for a transparent presentation of the development of this piece of research. For the sake of clarity and transparency, it is important to draw attention to the fact that I, the author of this thesis, am both a teacher (by training) and autistic. As such, this thesis is, understandably, influenced by this position that I have outlined.

1.1 Confucian Attitudes Towards Disability in China

As a Confucian heritage country, attitudes towards disability in China are, understandably, in keeping with the dominant Confucian thought, even though they can sometimes appear contradictory. There are scholars who adhere to the view that Confucianism sees disability positively, and for whom the Confucian virtue of *ren* (benevolence) is of the upmost importance. Frequently described as the most valuable of the Confucian virtues (Guo & Cui, 2012), *ren* encourages good and proper treatment towards oneself and others, in particular children, the elderly, people with illnesses, and disabled people (Gu, 2006). The importance of *ren* within Confucianism has led to the belief amongst many Chinese scholars that not only do disabled people benefit when others demonstrate the virtue of *ren* towards them, but also that the encouragement of proper treatment towards those with disabilities is akin to viewing disabled people as being highly regarded within Chinese society (e.g. Xie & Chen, 2014).Whilst it may be true that the virtue of *ren* does encourage society to view disabled people in a more positive light than might otherwise be the case, it is important to recognise that *proper* treatment does not automatically equate with respect, equitable treatment, or even equality. Yu et al. (2011), for example, found that positive attitudes towards disabled people in China do not stem from the idea that they are equal in society, but from pity and sympathy towards them.

For those who believe that Confucianism views disability in a negative light, Confucian philosophy has influenced thinking that has resulted in disabled people being viewed as helpless or deserving of sympathy (Shang et al., 2011; Zheng et al. 2014. Whilst it could be argued that such beliefs are antiquated, attitudes towards disabled people are still heavily influenced by Confucian thought and practices (Degenhardt & Zhang, 2015; Zhang, 2014) and are predominantly negative (Zhang, 2014). Whilst specific Confucian thoughts shall be discussed later in this thesis, this belief is objectionable and engenders discrimination.

1.2 The Current Gap in Research

As indicated, this thesis has been written to address the gaps that exist within the relevant research literature. These gaps are comprised of gaps in qualitative autism research and autism education research in China; gaps in research surrounding the concepts and practices of Chinese internationalised schools; and the absence of research concerned with alternative frameworks apart from Confucianism through which to view concepts of disability and social justice. These areas will be addressed thoroughly in chapter 2 and, regarding critical disability theory, in chapter 3. Before then, however, a brief overview of what some of these issues are would be helpful to keep in the back of one's mind throughout the reading of this thesis. These three specific topics will now be discussed in turn.

1.2.1 Gaps in Qualitative Autism Research

As with most disability research in China, interest in autism has only blossomed within the past ten years (Clark et al., 2019). It is of no surprise, therefore, that autism research within the 'Middle Kingdom' still has a way to go before the recognition and acknowledgement of autism becomes more prevalent in mainstream Chinese society. As with any developing field, 'scientific' quantitative research usually dominates (Shuval et al., 2011). This is certainly the case here as most autism research in China is of a medical nature (e.g. Liu et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021). Despite an increased medical interest in autism in China however, work by Sullivan and Wang (2020) and Khan et al. (2013) has indicated that most autism research continues to be conducted in North America and Europe thus, inevitably, pointing towards an under investigated field in China. From a qualitative and education-based standpoint, as will be discussed in detail in chapter 2, little exists in the way of pre-existing research (Wang et al., 2019). Some work addresses the necessity for a more complete understanding of the needs of China's autistic population – both educational and social (e.g. Bak et al., 2022; McCabe, 2013; Zhang & Spencer, 2015) but the majority of research instead addresses the causes, symptoms, and treatments of autism within China (e.g. Wang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2019), and further reinforces the current preference for quantitative, scientific investigations over qualitative educational ones.

1.2.2 Gaps in Chinese Internationalised School Research

As of 2019, China had emerged as the market leader for international schools of the non-traditional type (internationalised schools) that allow the enrolment of locally based Chinese nationals (Bunnell & Poole, 2022; Civinini, 2019). However, the pedagogical and commercial practices of these schools remain under reported (Bunnell & Poole, 2022; Golis, 2024; Hayden & Thompson, 2013) and the schools themselves maintain an air of mystery due to their separation from the local community and solitary, more independent nature (Kong et al., 2020). Research has been conducted investigating the experiences of expatriate teachers working in Chinese internationalised schools (Bunnell & Poole, 2022, 2023; Golis, 2024) however, considering 80% of students attending these schools are local nationals (Bunnell, 2022), little research has been conducted on the experiences of local national teachers working in Chinese internationalised schools or the students they serve. In fact, several literature reviews could find no research concerned with these topics. Research did discuss the fact that internationalised schools are selected as they have the potential to offer students needing additional support a sanctuary of sorts (Golis, 2024; Kostogriz et al., 2022; Young, 2018) opening the way for a discussion to take place in chapter 2 of how these under investigated ‘safe havens’ (Golis, 2024) could potentially offer autistic students a more socially just education.

1.2.3 Gaps in Theoretical Understandings of Disability

Although little research exists on the topic, theoretical understandings of disability in China remain heavily rooted in Chinese Confucianist and Chinese Communist ideologies (X. Qu, 2022; Y. Qu, 2019; Zhang & Rosen, 2018). So far, however, the impact of Chinese Confucianist and Chinese Communist ideologies have resulted in the concept of disability being sidelined and disabled people placed into positions of powerlessness (Lin & Yang, 2018) as will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2. Because Chinese Confucianist and Chinese Communist understandings of disability seem to have resulted in the stifled development of disabled people in society, this thesis will suggest the need for an alternative understanding of disability to be more fully outlined in chapter 3. This alternative understanding of disability will come from the perspective of Critical Disability

Theory that, owing to a lack of work conducted around qualitive studies of disability in general in China, is better situated as an alternative understanding to disability than Critical Autism Theory despite this thesis focusing specifically on the experiences of autistic people. This is not due to an inherent weakness of Critical Autism Theory (as will be discussed briefly in chapter 2 and 3) but is due to the fact that Critical Disability Theory is a broader theory that, considering the lack of research concerning disability in general in China would allow for this thesis to be, where necessary, situated within considerations concerning disability research at a generic level as well as the specific context of autism.

1.3 Research Aim and Research Questions

In response to the gaps in research, and in an attempt to answer the research question: To what extent are Chinese internationalised schools able to provide a more socially just education to autistic students, this thesis relies on the following sub-questions:

a. To what extent do autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools perceive themselves to be valued and included by their schools?

b. What attitudes do teachers who teach in Chinese internationalised schools have towards autistic students, real or hypothetical, enrolled in those schools?

c. What perceptions do autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools have of their life and employment prospects as a result of their education?

d. To what extent do Chinese internationalised schools propagate awareness of and promote neurodiversity?

e. To what extent do autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools have a 'voice' within their schools in matters relating to themselves and their education?

Whilst containing descriptive elements, these research questions are exploratory in nature and, by adhering to Critical Disability Theory (CDT) (Goodley et al., 2019; Puar, 2017), seek to recognise the voices and lived experiences of autistic students. Answering these questions will provide an insight into the potentially inclusive nature of Chinese internationalised schools, allowing a determination to be made as to whether they can offer a more socially just education to autistic students. The thesis addresses the inequitable position that autistic students currently occupy within the Chinese education system and seeks not only to inform practice within the Chinese context but also to be applicable to the education of autistic students world-wide.

1.4 Thesis Structure

This thesis is organised into 7 chapters. The current chapter (chapter 1) has provided some useful background information, has outlined the gap in current literature and has drawn attention to the research aims and questions that are central to this piece of work. Chapter 2 is a comprehensive literature review that starts with an analysis of autism. The purpose of this analysis is to raise awareness of the difficulties that autistic students may face in school and in life in general and to recognise how knowledge surrounding autism has developed historically. Whilst this area will be expanded upon further in chapter 2, it is important to note that, for the purposes of this thesis, the discussion surrounding the historical development of autism does not include an in-depth investigation of autism theory. This is not due to autism theory being seen as unimportant but is instead due to a consideration of the parameters placed upon this thesis (adhering to a word count, for example) and the plethora of extant work that has been conducted that outlines the development of autism theory more clearly than work documenting the somewhat ‘hazy’ accounts of the development of autism historically. The literature review will finish by providing an in-depth look at the current position of autistic students within the Chinese education system before drawing attention to the concept of internationalised schools and the opportunities they may offer autistic students, together with the potential they have to realise the concept of a socially just education on a theoretical level.

Chapter 3 introduces the concept of critical disability theory and how the theory relates to autism and to my notion of a socially just education that has been influenced both by pre-existing work surrounding the concept, and by the teachings and theoretical underpinnings of CDT.

Chapter 4 describes the methodology used for the purposes of my research. It begins by explaining my interpretative phenomenological perspective that serves as the basis of this study and outlines my epistemological and ontological beliefs as well as locating these within the wider debate of methodology. I then proceed to outline and defend the qualitative methods used for data collection in this study, namely semi-structured individual interviews. This chapter introduces participant demographics, essential for any possibility of replicability, and information concerning the participants and why they were selected for participation. The chapter addresses important ethical issues arising in this study, including participant consent, protection from harm, participant confidentiality, and my position as a researcher and the power dynamics that need to be considered when occupying such a position. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the data analysis technique employed and a consideration of how reliable and valid this method of analysis was.

Chapters 5 reports the findings of the research in relation to the themes and sub-themes uncovered during the process of thematic analysis of the data collected from the participants involved.

Chapter 6 forms the main body of the discussion as to whether or not Chinese internationalised schools are able to provide a more socially just education to students diagnosed with autism. This chapter provides an analysis of the findings discussed in Chapter 5 through the lens of CDT and the concept of a socially just education as derived from the theory. The chapter moves beyond the Chinese context and discusses these findings as they relate to autism education worldwide. It is in this chapter that I draw upon the literature discussed in chapter 2 to further inform pre-existing research.

Chapter 7 presents my conclusions regarding the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools are capable of providing students diagnosed with autism with a more socially just education. During this final chapter I offer an honest analysis of the limitations of this study before suggesting the range of potential implications of its findings on policy and practice both within the Chinese context and around the world. I finish this thesis by making recommendations for future research and by presenting a statement encouraging the inclusion and involvement of those diagnosed with autism in any future research concerning autism.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to investigate the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools are capable of providing students with autism with a more socially just education, it is important that the parameters of the discussion are outlined from the start. As research surrounding autism in general is extensive, owing to nearly eighty years of work on the topic, it is impossible for this thesis to explore every avenue of inquiry. The following literature review seeks, instead, to provide an introduction to and critical analysis of the concept of autism and to investigate the current situation and status of autistic students within the pre-existing Chinese education system and society. It will finish by describing the nature of internationalised schools and their potential to realise the concept of a socially just education for autistic students on a theoretical level.

2.1 Autism

In the words of the National Autistic Society, autism is 'a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world' (National Autistic Society, 2022). Those who identify as autistic or who have received a diagnosis of autism usually have difficulties in one or more areas of functioning, including difficulties in social interaction and communication, impairments in reciprocal social interaction, and the existence of restricted or repetitive interests and behaviours (Hodges et al., 2020; Joon et al., 2021; Seltzer et al., 2003). Owing to the increased prevalence of autism in the world (Zeidan et al., 2022), autism research remains a popular area of academic inquiry, with recent literature investigating sex differences and the comparatively low number of females diagnosed with autism in relation to males (Bedford et al., 2020; Lai & Szatmari, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020), improved screening for clinical diagnoses of autism (Lipkin et al., 2020; Shahamiri & Thabtah, 2020; Wang et al., 2020), participatory research that encourages autistic people to both design and conduct research concerned with autism (Ariel-Cascio et al., 2021; Botha, 2020; Courchesne et al., 2022; Pickard et al., 2022), and the concept of convergence which seeks to discover similarities between 'types' of autism and the reason why 'multiple forms' of autism exist (Kelly et al., 2020; Tai et al., 2020).

2.1.1 A Condensed History of Autism

As a result of the work conducted by Austrian American physician Leo Kanner (1943, 1944, 1965), autism was initially viewed as an exceptionally rare developmental disorder and an early form of childhood psychosis or schizophrenia that was exacerbated by toxic parenting and existed, in the medical community at the time, as a well outlined, distinct diagnoseable condition with no possibility of co-morbidity (Silberman, 2015; Volkmar & McPartland, 2015). Kanner's 'discovery' of autism and his emergent theories surrounding its nature, its cause, and the recommended treatment for it have subsequently undergone significant revision and development. Nonetheless, they continue to be held at least partially responsible for creating incorrect lines of inquiry that were potentially damaging to the field of autism research and that have contributed, to an extent, to the long-lasting negative stereotypes faced by those with autism, and for directing attention away from work that was closer to presenting a more 'true' depiction of autism (Rosen et al., 2021; Silberman, 2015). The decision by Kanner to propagate the description of autism as a rare and well-defined developmental disorder is interesting, particularly in view of the fact that research has revealed that he was almost certainly aware at the time of the work of fellow Austrian physician, Hans Asperger. Asperger had used the word autism, in its modern sense, in an earlier paper entitled *Autistic psychopathy in childhood* (Asperger, 1944), and had described many of the same features of autism as Kanner, but from the perspective that autism was not especially rare and that those with autism were more likely to present as socially odd 'little professors', as opposed to Kanner's description of autistic children whose needs would be best served in specialised institutions (Chown & Hughes, 2016; Silberman, 2015). It was Kanner's narrower, 'classical' depiction of autism, however, that enjoyed mainstream recognition and popularity, whilst Asperger's work went all but forgotten by the predominantly English language medical journals of the day, partially because of stigma attached to 'German science' that followed the conclusion of the Second World War. In the decades following Kanner's 1944 publication, work continued, incorrectly linking autism with schizophrenia, and propagating the narrative of autism as a rare condition characterised by extreme isolation that most physicians would not encounter in their practice (e.g., Andrews & Cappon, 1957; Chapman, 1966; Eisenberg & Kanner, 1956; Kanner, 1965; Ward & Hoddinott, 1965). It was only in the late 1960s that the relationship between autism and schizophrenia began to be seriously questioned (e.g., Rutter, 1968) and as late as the end of the 1970s that the relationship between autism and schizophrenia or psychosis was categorially dismissed within the scientific community (Volkmar & McPartland, 2014). By the end of the 1970s and due to developments in the understanding of autism, it was evident that Kanner's description of autism and his diagnostic methods were in need of revision. This came in the form of the inclusion of autism in the American Psychological Association's (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III, 1980) as a developmental disorder in its own right

(Rosen et al., 2021). During this paradigm shift, research began to focus on the varying degrees to which autism presented in individuals diagnosed with the condition, and on the fact that the seemingly individualised nature of autism necessitated a move away from viewing it as condition with a universal phenotype and towards the idea of a continuum, or autism spectrum, that identified and recognised different levels of 'severity' and functioning (Millichap, 1988; Minshew & Payton, 1988; Wing, 1988). Furthermore, 'newer' forms of autism began to be recognised, such as Asperger's syndrome that enjoyed renewed interest following the translation of Asperger's work into English by Uta Frith (1991), and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) that was used to diagnose autistic individuals who displayed 'milder' symptoms than those diagnosed with either Asperger's syndrome or Kanner's/classical autism (Matson et al., 2007; Waler et al., 2004). This wider definition of autism called for more specialised diagnostic tools which were designed to address the variety of ways that autism can present and which comprised a number of approaches including psychometric tests designed to report on the adaptive skills, executive functioning skills, and the intelligence of autistic people (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001; Torralva et al., 2013). As a result of the introduction of these tests, it became common practice to label autistic individuals as either 'high functioning' or 'low functioning', where 'high functioning' indicates an average or above average IQ score, comparatively higher levels of independence, and social abilities that, whilst still impaired, are 'advanced' enough to allow at least partial access in neurotypical society (neurotypical being used as a term to describe the predominant, non-autistic neurotype (Beardon, 2021)). By contrast, 'low functioning' describes those diagnosed with autism who may also have an intellectual disability, limited independence, and significant or extreme difficulties in socialising (Baio, 2012). Historically, Asperger's syndrome and PDD-NOS have most often been associated with 'high functioning' autism owing to their 'less severe' symptoms and, in the case of Asperger's syndrome, the complete absence of 'autistic delays' in childhood, together with the presence of highly developed language skills not normally seen in diagnoses of classical autism (Soulières et al., 2011).

Whilst the concept of the autism spectrum has existed since the early 1980s, a true spectrum approach to autism has only recently been adopted, with the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) merging Kanner's/classical autism, autistic disorder, Asperger's syndrome, and PDD-NOS into the aptly named umbrella category of autism. This move has been controversial, with bodies such as the World Health Organisation (2016), in their published International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 10th Revision (ICD-10), continuing to view the constituent disorders that comprise the DSM-5 umbrella category of autism as related but separate conditions. Furthermore, the autistic community itself remains divided in the debate around the concept of an autism spectrum umbrella. For example, many individuals previously diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome feel as though a part of their identity and a relationship with their diagnosis has been taken away following the subsummation of discrete conditions under the umbrella of autism (Giles, 2014; Huynh et al., 2020; Smith & Jones, 2020). Others, however, have welcomed the change and have suggested that a spectrum approach allows for a united autistic front (Huynh et al., 2020; Smith & Jones, 2020). Although the debate surrounding the spectrum approach is likely to continue for some time, its very existence shines light on what is an important chapter in the history of autism, namely that autism is not simply a diagnosed medical disorder or difference, but that it has become, for many autistic people, an identity or community whose constituent members share a collective or, at the very least, inter-related culture, consciousness, trauma, history, and societal goal (Botha et al., 2022; Hume & Burgess, 2021; Milton, 2016). Initially, the autistic community was overwhelmingly comprised of physicians who worked with autistic individuals, the parents of autistic children or adults, and academic researchers involved in the field of autism research (McVey et al., 2023). Relatively recently, however, there has been something of a paradigm shift, as autistic individuals have started re-claiming their community in their own name and image (Botha, 2021; Botha et al., 2022; Parsloe, 2015). Work has been done, for example, to move away from a linear understanding of autism as having individuals who are 'low functioning' at one end and 'high functioning' at the other, towards recognising autism as a 'dynamic disability' that presents differently in every individual and results in unique strengths and challenges that manifest differently in all autistic people depending on a cacophony of factors including environment, specific life events at that point in time, and societal attitude (Ripamonti, 2016). Furthermore, technological advances, such as the arrival of social media, better quality communication devices, and the emergence of online communities, has meant that autistic people, who have long occupied some of the most marginalised and isolated positions in society (Jones et al., 2022; Pearson et al., 2023), have been able to come together to discuss autism issues, raise arms against injustice, collaborate, communicate, and share autistic experiences of autism directly to the autistic community. (Egner, 2022; Tisoncik, 2019).

2.2 Models of Autism

Although discourse surrounding autism has gradually begun to be opened up to autistic people who want to make their voices heard, it is clear from the history of autism, as outlined above, that there are multiple ways of conceptualising and viewing the neurotype. At one end of the continuum is the medical model of autism that views it first and foremost as a medical condition that can be understood through scientific and academic research into its characteristics or clinical markers, its neurological and genetic components, and the levels of 'functioning' that autistic people display (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022; Waltz, 2008). At the other end of the continuum, and of particular importance for this thesis, are social models of autism that hold that the concepts of disability (in this case autism) and 'normality' are socially and ideologically constructed in order to prevent disabled people from full participation in society as a result of their disability (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013; Anderson-Chavarria, 2022). Both models have had a significant impact on autism policy and educational support for autistic people, and on how autism is viewed by society as a whole. They will be discussed in turn, paying particular attention to an education policy and practice standpoint so as to better understand the impact of the different models on existing thought surrounding autism and education.

2.2.1 A Medical Model of Autism

As may be evident from the condensed history of the autism outlined in this thesis, the medical model of autism is, to all intents and purposes, the documented history and historically accepted and dominant approach to viewing autism (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022; Silberman, 2015). Although this assertion may seem to devalue the impact of other models of autism on research, public or educational policy, and even on general awareness of the condition, studies on the history of autism continue to highlight the dominant position that the medical model has always held and continues to hold in the field. Whilst it is unnecessary to reiterate the clinical 'discovery' and history of autism, it is important, because of its popularity, to draw attention to the impact that a medical approach has had on the way that autism is viewed in general, how autistic people are or are not supported in society, and how policy has been influenced. As the medical approach to autism initially concerned itself with the identification, treatment, and, in some cases, cure of autism (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022), the clinical symptoms of autism are particularly important in assessing the impact of a medical model. From a medical standpoint, the very existence of autism as a diagnosable and recognisable 'disorder' that can be studied, treated, and cured relies on the existence of an agreed set of symptoms that identify autistic people as being different from the neurotypical population. The symptoms of autism, that exist primarily as unwanted pathologies in the medical field (Barnes & McCabe, 2012; O'Reilly et al., 2020; Verhoeff, 2015), impact the lives of those with autism and, in turn, inform policy and practice in relation to the treatment of autistic people within various public spheres, including education. These symptoms will be discussed in turn in order to shed light on what they are, how they affect the lives of autistic people within educational institutions, and how educational services have adapted and responded to them.

2.2.1.1 Difficulties in Social Interaction and Communication

Perhaps one of the most identifiable and 'well known' symptoms of autism is the often cited (and diagnosis dependent) difficulty that autistic people have in social interaction and communication (APA, 2013; Wood-Downie et al., 2021). How these difficulties present, however, varies from person to person. Some autistic people, often regarded as 'low functioning', may, for example, display significant delays in spoken language including, in some cases, the complete absence of spoken language, unusual or inappropriate language usage, echolalic speech patterns, and language comprehension problems (Gernsbacher et al., 2016; Maljaars et al., 2012; Prelock & Nelson, 2012; Schaeffer et al., 2023; Ellis-Weismer et al., 2010). At the other end of the medically accepted linear spectrum of autism, those considered to be 'high functioning' have been identified as possessing average or, in many incidences, above average language skills (Narzisi et al., 2013; Noterdaeme et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2014). Whilst advanced language skills have been regarded as a strength, difficulties in language usage persist in those with 'high functioning' autism, resulting in their language being described as eccentric, unusual, idiosyncratic, or odd (Attwood, 2008; Luyster et al., 2022). Furthermore, highly developed language skills can often mask the difficulties that some autistic people have in pragmatic language (Cardillo et al., 2021; Dolata et al., 2022). This can lead, in some cases, to misunderstandings and subsequent ostracization or isolation (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Locke et al., 2010; Parsons et al., 2017).

Whilst language usage has been regarded as both a strength and a challenge, a more universally recognised difficulty across the medically defined autism spectrum is the autistic experience with non-verbal communication and social interaction (APA, 2013; Bottema-Beutel, 2017; Davis & Crompton, 2021; Yavuz et al., 2019). From a medical standpoint, difficulties in social interaction and communication have been attributed to several causes, including the following: a deficit in an autistic person's theory of mind, which suggests that autistic people struggle to understand, empathise, or imagine another person's emotional situation, state of being, or thoughts and feelings (Andreou & Skrimpa, 2020; Baron-Cohen et al., 1985; Livingston et al., 2019; Matthews & Goldberg, 2018; Shamsi et al., 2017;); a social motivation theory that suggests that autistic people have diminished social motivation resulting in less attention being diverted to communication and social interaction as a whole (Bottini, 2018; Chevallier et al., 2012; Dawson & Bernier, 2007); and an anxiety based model that proposes that the mechanisms underpinning a lack of social motivation stem from increased anxiety rather than an inherent diminishing of social motivation in autistic people (Bagg et al., 2023; Factor et al., 2016; Swain et al., 2015). Additional theories providing possible reasons for autistic difficulties in social interaction and communication have focused on executive dysfunction and the challenges that autistic people face in information processing and in shifting attention from one task to another (Hemmers et al., 2022; May & Kana, 2020; Xie et al., 2020). As autistic people have been shown to have impairments relating to executive functioning and cognitive flexibility (Di Sarro et al., 2021; Pellicano, 2007), it is feasible to suggest that these impairments could make transitioning from an independent task (for example completing an assigned piece of work at school) to another task (engaging in a conversation with a teacher or classmate) difficult to navigate or to complete successfully, especially if the two tasks require a different set of skills or processes to complete (Ozonoff et al., 2004; Sawaya et al., 2021).

Regardless of the reasons *why* autistic people experience difficulties in social interaction and communication, a significant amount of research has documented the fact that these challenges are substantial and can prevent autistic people from making meaningful connections within society, from living fulfilling lives, and from accessing the same opportunities afforded to non-autistic people (Cassidy et al., 2018; Elmose, 2020; Hedley et al., 2018; Mazurek, 2014).

Within inherently social institutions such as schools (Connell, 1993), difficulties in social interaction and communication can produce a variety of challenges for autistic people that may not necessarily manifest organically in other spheres of society. These difficulties include adhering to spoken and unspoken rules that exist between peers, communicating effectively and appropriately with peers and teachers, making meaningful connections with peers and teachers, and navigating complex socio-political systems that exist within educational institutions (Crompton et al., 2020; Ghanouni et al., 2019; McDougal et al., 2020; Pesonen et al., 2023; Sulaimani & Gut, 2019; Thomas & Bambara, 2020). As a result, many autistic people have had a less than positive schooling experience. For example, research has highlighted that autistic students are the most likely demographic to experience bullying (Blake et al., 2012) with 86% of the autistic population attending school finding it difficult to manage (Carrington et al., 2017). Furthermore, it has been reported that autistic people experience a greater sense of loneliness than their non-autistic peers, especially when entering adolescence (Deckers et al., 2017; Lasgaard et al., 2010) and that rates of 'autistic anxiety' (Beardon, 2020, 2021), particularly in school age populations, result in greater levels of academic and social difficulty (Adams & Emerson, 2021; Ambrose et al., 2021; den Houting et al., 2018) and decreased levels of participation in school activities that may potentially lead to academic underachievement and feelings of loneliness (Estes et al., 2011; Meindl et al., 2020; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2010). In response to the difficulties with social interaction and communication and the potential impact of these difficulties on the autistic experience of formal schooling, research has evolved aimed at promoting the increased inclusion of autistic students within their schools (Brede et al., 2017; Saggers & Carrington, 2021; White et al., 2023). For example, in nations such as the United Kingdom and the United States, it is common practice to provide additional learning or friendship support for autistic learners (Davis et al., 2022; Raulston & Hanson, 2021; Zilli et al., 2020). Such support may take the form of social skills clubs (Chen et al., 2023; McDaniel et al., 2022), 'buddy' programmes (Corsi, 2023; Ziegler et al., 2020; Ziegler & Morrier, 2022), or in-class targeted support from a specialist teacher or support professional, designed to facilitate inclusion and involvement in class (Meindl et al., 2020; Stephenson et al., 2021). Whilst there are an exhaustive number of supports available for autistic students, the thinking behind the support offered is often focussed on the idea that the behaviour or behaviours exhibited by the autistic person are inherently detrimental to success in school. Social skills training, for instance, usually requires the autistic learner to learn how to communicate with their neurotypical peers in a neurotypical way, rather than encouraging neurotypical individuals to be aware when communicating with autistic people (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018, 2021; Hull et al., 2017; Keats et al., 2022). Likewise, targeted interventions designed to encourage and support autistic students to become more involved in the life of the school often have the opposite effect. Research has found that, despite support and interventions being put in place to promote assimilation, autistic students are still marginalised and rejected by their neurotypical peers and are more likely to experience bullying (Chatzitheochari et al., 2014; Cook et al., 2016). Whilst this finding may seem pessimistic, it is supported by the fact that, in many instances, support for autistic students exists as a policy directive which, in reality, has a long way to go in ensuring that autistic students are truly included (Hasson et al., 2024; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Indeed, research has shown that some educational institutions or teachers within them are unwilling to engage in truly meaningful change so as to include autistic learners due to a lack of understanding about autism and to the persistence of the belief that autism exists as a problem to be fixed rather than something to be accommodated (Roberts & Simpson, 2016; Wood, 2021).

2.2.1.2 Restrictive/Repetitive Patterns of Behaviour/Interest

Despite existing as a core feature for a medical diagnosis of autism, the concept of restrictive or repetitive patterns of behaviour or interest (RRB) remains poorly categorised and vague when referenced in extant literature and when identified or reported upon in clinical settings (Leekam et al., 2011; Uljarevic et al., 2022). That being said, it is important for the sake of clarity within this thesis that an attempt be made to identify what medically defined RRBs are. Recent research by Uljarevic et al. (2022) utilized the largest existing data set of RRB domains and reported that the three most predominant examples of RRB are : (1) ‘repetitive motor behaviours’ that include hand and finger movements (such as hand wringing or flapping), repetitive body movements (some of which may be self-harming in their nature) or motions or repetitive use of objects; (2) ‘insistence on sameness’ that manifests as individualised rituals with difficulty adapting to major or minor changes in routine; and (3) ‘restricted or circumscribed interests’ that could be described as obsessive or inflexible in their intensity or focus. These findings corroborate previous research that, although focussed primarily on the difficulties with social interaction and communication experienced by autistic people rather than on RRBs (Boyd et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2021), refers to a significant number of autistic people who display examples of repetitive motor behaviours, an insistence on sameness, and restricted or circumscribed interests, either exclusively or in conjunction with one or more of the other three predominant examples of RRBs previously referred to (Uljarevic et al., 2022). Further research has found that all autistic people seem to experience all the three most common examples of RRB to a greater or lesser extent (Berry et al., 2018; Bourreau et al., 2009).

From a medical perspective, the existence of RRBs within the autistic population is universally viewed as maladaptive, problematic, or unwanted (Bourreau et al., 2009; Lai, 2023; Leekam et al., 2011) Explanations for the existence of RRBs amongst autistic people predominantly focus on the 'atypical', 'divergent', or 'unusual' nature of autism and on the expression of the condition in an individual (Uljarevic et al., 2022) rather than on the possibility that RRBs represent a coping strategy for autistic people, developed to allow for the sense of order, structure, and routine they need to survive in a neurotypical society that has not been designed with their needs in mind. For example, a comprehensive literature search conducted for the purposes of this thesis and encompassing the past twenty years, revealed that almost all relevant research, which it should be noted is scarce, associated the occurrence of RRBs with the presence of higher levels of anxiety within autistic populations because of their autism (Jefferson & Erp, 2023; Russell et al., 2019; Sellick et al., 2021).

From an education perspective, the existence of RRBs can present a challenge for both the autistic student and for the institutions in which they are educated if they are enrolled in a formal schooling program (Klin et al., 2007; Lin & Koegel, 2018). Whilst some research has recognised that the highly structured nature of the school environment can help autistic students establish 'positive' routines and offer a sense of 'sameness' that many of them rely on (Bolourian et al., 2022), other research has identified the potentially traumatic impact of schooling on autistic students because of, for example, unexpected routine changes that are an accepted and often inevitable reality of school life, as illustrated by nations' reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic and the manner in which autistic children were reported to have responded (Alhuzimi, 2021; Amorim et al., 2020; Colizzi et al., 2020; Genova et al., 2021). Moreover, whilst specific RRBs may differ from person to person, in general they usually consist of at least one element that is universally viewed as detrimental within schools (Jaffey. & Ashwin, 2022). In the case of repetitive body, hand, or related motor movements, research has indicated that, despite the possible negative outcomes of preventing autistic students from moving (Lengel & Kuczala, 2010), there still exists a stigma surrounding movement or self-stimulatory behaviour (Kapp et al., 2019) with behavioural expectations such as sitting still to show readiness, having ‘calm hands and feet’, and the propagation of ‘whole body listening’ approaches continuing to be the norm despite running the risk of being considered ableist (Parekh, 2024; Poed & Fox, 2023). Being prevented from engaging on a daily basis in self-stimulatory or repetitive bodily movements, often required for autistic coping or survival (Beardon, 2021; Kapp et al., 2019), has been shown to result in a significant decrease in the quality of life for the autistic person (McCormack et al., 2023; Sandoval-Norton et al., 2019).

The presence of restricted or circumscribed interests can sometimes be of some benefit to the autistic student at school. If, for example, their interests lie in an area that may result in employment, encouragement and a willingness to accommodate an interest could be an outcome and could lead to a future career (Koenig & Williams, 2017; Wood, 2019). However, such encouragement and support, whilst admirable, would appear only to be true for a select few cases. Research has indicated that autistic students who do not display ‘desirable’ interests may not benefit from the engagement of their interests in school and may instead be forced to modify or eliminate their interests so as to cater to neurotypical expectations (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016; Mercier et al., 2000; Wood, 2019). Moreover, restricted or circumscribed interests have often been described as all-encompassing and capable of absorbing all the attention of the autistic individual (Murray, 2021; Wood, 2023). From an education perspective, the result is a student who may be intently focussed in one area of learning but disinterested in others (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016; Mancil & Pearl, 2008). It is unsurprising, therefore, that research has indicated that, regardless of ability level, autistic learners often underperform at a general academic level when the areas that stimulate and interest them are ignored within the classroom (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016). Whilst attention has been given to the presence of RRBs amongst autistic students in schools, a great deal of focus has been placed on encouraging them to adapt their behaviour in order to fit into school rather than the other way around (Gunn & Delafield-Butt, 2016; Wood, 2019). These findings further highlight the fact that the medically based model of autism continues to thrive within the field of education where support consistently focusses on ‘normalising’ the autistic student rather than on making adjustments to suit their needs. Even where support does focus on an autistic individual’s strengths (such as a specific interest in mathematics, for example), the support available only exists for as long as a skill or talent is deemed educationally appropriate or useful. In the case of RRBs in general, they continue to be viewed as unusual, disruptive, odd, or unwanted (Bourreau et al., 2009; Lai, 2023; Leekam et al., 2011) within society and, by extension, within schools.

2.2.2 A Social/Rights Model of Autism

Whilst the far-reaching and all-encompassing impact on society of a medical model of autism cannot be understated, there has been growing research into the concept of a social model of autism (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013; Chapman, 2019; Runswick-Cole et al., 2016). This model takes inspiration from the wider concept of a social model of disability that refuses to characterise disability as a problem to be rid of, instead shifting the ‘blame’ of disability away from disabled people and towards pre-existing political and societal institutions and infrastructures that, by their very existence and operation, ‘disable the disabled’ (Davis, 2016; Shakespeare & Watson, 1997). Although the social model of disability is in stark contrast to a medical model, it is best understood (in this thesis at least) as comprising multiple socially *based* models rather than a single unified approach. As the use of a traditional social model of disability has spread to the realm of autism studies, research has indicated that adjustments are needed to the model in order to truly account for the nature of autism and to ensure that autistic people are not automatically designated the permanent occupiers of powerless positions (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022; Levitt, 2017; Woods, 2017). One socially based model of autism is the human rights-based model. This model infuses the theoretical underpinnings of a social model of disability with the need to respect and consider the individuality and autonomy of the autistic individual and their needs which differ from person to person and context to context (Hodge et al., 2023; Sarrett, 2012). To paraphrase and expand upon the work of Woods (2017), whilst the social model of disability drew attention towards societal structures and away from the disabled individual as being the problem, the social/rights-based model of autism goes further by holding societal institutions accountable for making changes to benefit autistic people rather than simply recognising a discriminatory societal structure and doing nothing about it.

A social/rights model of autism relies heavily on the fact that our societal understanding of autism remains medically informed (Graby, 2016; Silberman, 2015; Woods, 2017) thus allowing society to continue to treat autistic people as being less than. Work by Silberman (2015), however, and his documentation of the history of autism has highlighted the fact that the medical 'truth' of autism has been almost continuously revised over the past eighty years. Far from the disabling nature of autism being a universal truth, continuous updates to diagnostic criteria, disagreements regarding the causes of autism, and even disputes surrounding what autism is add to the idea that medical knowledge and thought about autism is fallible, incomplete, and a human construction designed simply to push a disabling agenda and present autistic people as 'other' (Silberman, 2015). Indeed, the existence of multiple diagnostic frameworks, such as the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) or ICD-11 (WHO, 2024), that have different diagnostic criteria, suggests that the scientific 'facts' of autism are open to interpretation and change. The fact that a medical model of autism is open for debate is of no particular surprise, especially considering that what we 'know' about autism stems essentially from a small set of case studies (Silberman, 2015; Waltz, 2013) put forward by Kanner (1943), who frequently made grandiose and spurious claims regarding his own research, scientific methods, and discovery of autism (Silberman, 2015), Asperger (1944), whose writing and beliefs about autism changed in the late 30s and 40s to better reflect trends in Nazi psychiatry which he is now believed to have been consciously embracing (Sheffer, 2018), and Bettelheim (1967), who, apart from possessing contentious academic qualifications, was believed to have engaged in plagiarism and abuse of power in his academic career (Silberman, 2015). Whilst there is no doubt that the work of these individuals did introduce autism into society in the early to mid-twentieth century, it has been written that, for example, 'the Klein and Bettelheim texts are written in a format more closely approximating a fictive narrative than a medical text' (Waltz, 2005: 433) and that 'diagnoses of autism are essentially storytelling in character' (Duffy & Dorner, 2011: 201). The result of this is not, as a medical model would suggest, a comprehensive understanding of autism based upon solid scientific work but is instead a diagnoseable disability that, despite being built upon unstable foundations, has real consequences for individual lives.

Whilst it is not disputed that autistic people experience the world differently to non-autistic people, it is considered incorrect within a social/rights model of autism to equate differences with deficiencies (Dinishak, 2016; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). It has been reported, however, that most of the language used when referring to autism has been medicalising, pathologizing, and deficit-based (Monk et al., 2022; Gernsbacher, 2017) which suggests the existence of autistic deficiencies as opposed to autistic differences. Where this is the case, a social/rights approach would be to argue that the purposeful and targeted use of 'othering language' in relation to autistic people positions the 'problem' of autism within the autistic person and, due to the power of language, determines how autistic people should be viewed and informs attitudes (Woods, 2017). The prejudice faced by autistic people due to the language involved in the autism discourse is not necessarily *consciously* propagated or recognised as a societal problem by those who are not targeted by it (i.e. non-autistic people). However, it is precisely because non-autistic people and societal structures are not made responsible for making adjustments that benefit autistic people (Woods, 2017) that autistic people continue to face implicit discrimination and exclusion from all areas of society. Studies investigating neurotypical perceptions of autism, for example, found that whilst participants explicitly stated that they had positive views towards autistic people, implicit negative views were the most commonly held (Dickter et al., 2020). Furthermore, despite research recognising that autistic people do not view themselves with a pathology of autism in mind (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2020; Kapp et al., 2013), that fact has been ignored, and autistic people have been discriminated against by being excluded from the very research that is about them *because* they are autistic and are therefore seen as incapable of producing reliable knowledge and understanding about autism (Frith & Happe, 1999; Hens et al., 2019). Whilst not an exhaustive list, these attitudes towards autism do little or nothing to help the development of a society that values difference and encourages autistic inclusion. Whilst these attitudes may not stem inherently from explicit prejudices against autistic people, a social/rights view would argue that they exist because of the dominant medical model of disability with which they share the same conscious or unconscious aim – the restoration of normality and dominance of the abled over the disabled (Oliver, 1996).

Although the wider realm of social models of disability (including a social/rights model) have gained significant support amongst disabled people, activists, and academics, this has not led to an uptake of such models within educational institutions, educational policy, and educational practices.

Owing to the neo-liberal belief prevalent throughout most of the world's education systems that the main purpose of education is to support and promote a globally competitive economy (Adams, 2013; Ball, 2016; Hall & Pulsford, 2019), many of the educational practices and policies in place in schools, at both a national and international level, may look familiar. Practices such as standardised testing (Ambrosio, 2013; Hursh, 2007, 2017; Rasco, 2020), the promotion and privileging of the 'sciences' over the 'arts' (Aróstegui, 2020; Fautley, 2019), and the removal of freedom within educational policy (Dale & Robertson, 2009; de Saxe et al., 2018) stem directly from the influence of neo-liberalism within the education systems of the world and, as indicated by previous research, often work against the educational interests of the students who fall within the ambit of the neo-liberal mandate (e.g. de Saxe et al., 2018; Waite & Waite, 2021; Wong, 2022). It is unsurprising, therefore, that educational systems, programmes, practices, and policies, designed to integrate autistic students into mainstream or specialist schooling, have been influenced and shaped by the prevalent neo-liberal agenda. Methods designed to support the education of autistic students in mainstream schools, such as social skills training, enrolment in the mainstream classroom, buddy systems, or targeted interventions, may be the subject of research (Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022), but the effectiveness of these practices has been questioned as the focus has steadily shifted from the perspective of educators aiming to 'normalise' their autistic students towards the extent to which they succeed in ensuring that autistic students are truly successful in all aspects of their formal schooling. For example, research conducted within urban schools reported that, despite the existence of autism-related interventions, they are rarely implemented or adopted in practice owing to the fact that the needs, requirements, and priorities of schools do not align with the desires and needs of autistic students (Locke et al., 2015). Similarly, the use of technology within the mainstream classroom has been touted as a means of addressing the social difficulties that autistic students often face (e.g. Ibrahim & Alias, 2018), but has been found to have limited success and often presents the illusion of learning when, in reality, it serves as a time filling activity rather than a valuable and facilitative educational experience (Knight et al., 2013). It is important to recognise that not all research has concluded that commonly used interventions for autistic students are unsuccessful. Indeed, two long-term systematic reviews of academic and skills intervention in American public schools found that interventions were at least somewhat effective in supporting the academic and social development of autistic students (Alresheed et al., 2018; Macmillan et al., 2021). That being said, on closer inspection, some approaches included in the analysis, such as the work conducted by Blakeley-Smith et al. (2009), that focussed on adjusting the academic environment and curriculum demands placed on autistic students to nurture success, are a step beyond the commonplace interventions normally implemented for autistic students, particularly in public schools. Moreover, it was identified that further research is required to adequately inform knowledge surrounding intervention strategies, autistic students, educational approaches and curriculum areas (Alrasheed et al., 2018; Grynszpan et al., 2014; Stokes et al., 2017; Virues-Ortega et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2013), and authors acknowledged that publication bias, in which studies with positive results are often overrepresented in literature (Shadish et al., 2016), may well be present in systematic reviews relating to autism and educational interventions (Alrasheed et al., 2018) possibly due to the influence of the neo-liberal educational agenda on discourse surrounding the concept of 'disabled' education. Rather than focussing on specific interventions, Petersson-Bloom and Blomqvist (2022) noted that the success of inclusive intervention strategies was dependent on there being an awareness and understanding of and a respect towards autism and autistic people on the part of educators who had received appropriate training on the subject. This perspective could tie into current literature that, in some instances, does seem to be contrasting in nature. In these cases, the success of an intervention could be down to the beliefs held and attitudes perpetuated by educators towards their autistic students. To once again paraphrase Woods (2017), the language and attitudes used to describe and view an entity results in the entity being described and viewed in that manner.

It was stated that this chapter would investigate the social/rights approach to autism within educational institutions, policy, and practices. However, the investigation has only been possible through a deficit focussed approach that highlights the fundamental *absence* of such an approach. The literature search failed to find any concrete examples of a social/rights approach to autism being implemented, even in isolation, in educational policy and practice. This was despite a review of research and policy documents dated within the past five years from a variety of nations such as the UK, the US, and Australia who found that 'There is a timely need for focus of attention on more "overt and systematic policy support for inclusion in school settings"' (Carrington et al., 2024 p. 6). Research conducted with teachers in Bhutan for example found that they supported both a social/rights approach to educating autistic students that is inclusive in nature, nurturing, accepting of differences, and supportive of the agency of autistic students and a more neo-liberal or medical system of ‘micro-exclusion’ that sees autistic students segregated in self-contained or specialist autism classrooms (Dukpa, 2022). Similarly, whilst research conducted in The UK and Ireland recognised that teachers may have positive attitudes towards autistic students (Russell et al., 2023), these attitudes do not translate into a social/rights model reality within the schools that autistic students attend. The fact that positive attitudes exist towards autistic students is not enough to ensure inclusion (Russell et al., 2023) and is certainly not enough to remove from them the burden of adapting to a neurotypically designed societal institution.

As mentioned during chapter 1 of this thesis (and highlighted above), the history of autism and subsequent models of autism that owe their origins to that history can often appear ‘hazy’ or even overwhelming owing to the sheer amount of work that exists surrounding them. As such, it has been important to highlight the parts of autism history and models of autism that are relevant to this thesis specifically rather than providing a complete overview of every avenue and lens that autism has been investigated from. To that end, concepts of autism theory (aside from reference to the diagnostic *symptoms* of autism from a medical model outlined previously) have, in general, gone without investigation in this thesis. This is not due to this area of autism studies being considered unimportant but is due primarily to the scope of this thesis. References to autism theories such as monotropism, for example, that is described as a particularly powerful *autistically developed* theory of autism (Woods & Waltz, 2019) and sees the differences experienced by autistic people explained by the existence of ‘attention tunnels’ (Woods & Waltz, 2019) that views attention available outside of these ‘tunnels’ as a limited resource (Chown, 2017; Murray et al., 2005; Woods & Waltz, 2019), is a particularly powerful theory of autism that is often neglected due to research not relying on autism theory (Chown, 2017; Milton, 2017). That being said, these existing theories of autism, whether adhered to or not, have been well documented and, whilst their inclusion in this thesis would be interesting, the parameters of this thesis have necessitated that literature addressing disability in China in general and autism within the Chinese education system take precedent. This decision is valid as it is this literature rather than well documented autism theory literature (that, in order to be introduced to the Chinese context, first relies on work in China promoting a more complete understanding of disability in general) that is concerned with the lived reality of disabled and, by extension, autistic people within China and the education system especially considering the fact that disability in general and autism specifically remain under-researched areas in the context of China.

2.3 Disability, the Education System, Autism, and a Burgeoning Approach to Education in The People's Republic of China

As this thesis is concerned with a more 'socially just' education for autistic students enrolled in mainstream schools in China, and as autism is classified as a disability, it is important to consider how disability as a whole is viewed in Chinese society, what the Chinese education system currently looks like for autistic students, and how the concept of an 'internationalised school' might offer a more 'socially just' education for them. Whilst the medical model remains the preferred approach for researching disabilities, including autism (Graby, 2016), China's unique socio-political culture and its impact on the Chinese education system means that a more in-depth Chinese-focussed investigation of autism and of the education system is warranted.

2.3.1 Disability in Chinese Society

Within the People's Republic of China, disabled people represent some of the most marginalised and ostracised members of society who are continuously denied the right to participate in society and, as a result, receive fewer life, educational, and employment opportunities (Stein, 2015; Zheng et al., 2014). This attitude towards disabled people stems from the way that disability has been viewed historically within a collectivist society that has significant difficulty in tolerating or accepting it (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Ersan et al., 2020; Huppert et al., 2019). Even more important to understanding disability within a Chinese context is the fact that Confucianism underpins every aspect of Chinese society and has even been adopted by the Communist Party of China (CPC) as a means of ensuring political dominance and the continued support of the Chinese population (Bresciani, 2023; Chen, 2021; Wang & Nahm, 2019). As a political and moral philosophy, Confucianism is concerned with the creation of a peaceful and harmonious civilisation through cultivating an individual's behaviour and bettering the attitudes and propriety of humanity (Sun, 2008; Tan & Tan, 2016). Modern applications of Confucianism, however, especially political

Confucianism as adopted by the CPC, have re-conceptualized the notion of a peaceful and harmonious society to one that is obedient and that follows a strict social hierarchy, with the CPC on top (Wang & Nahm, 2019). This modern view of Confucianism has meant that the philosophy that is still so ingrained within Chinese society (Degenhardt & Zhang, 2015; Zhang, 2014) encourages disability to be seen at best, as an impurity or undesired state of being (Lam et al., 2010), and, at worst, as a curse or punishment (Li, 2015). Whilst attitudes do exist that are not inherently negative, such as viewing disabled people with sympathy or pity (Shang, Fisher and Xie 2011; Yu et al., 2011; Zheng et al. 2014) or believing that blind people are in possession of mystical powers (Li, 2015; Lu, 1996), these viewpoints are, nevertheless, misguided and ill-informed and have resulted in the stagnation of work designed to make Chinese society more accessible to disabled people (Zhang & Song, 2012). That being said, the majority of disabilities are seen as a consequence of punishment (Zhang, 2014) with the negative view of disability, as promoted by Confucianism, also extending to the role of the family. The birth of children with disabilities is often seen as a consequence of familial actions (Zhang & Rosen, 2018). The ensuing stigma can result in disabled children being denied social and educational opportunities which serves to further dehumanise, devalue, and misjudge those with disabilities (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012; Lam et al., 2010; Li, 2015; Yang, 2009).

Regarded as a ‘hidden disability’ (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020) and so potentially less obvious within society, autism and autistic people, are very much at the receiving end of the collectivist and Confucianist inspired ableist attitudes prevalent in Chinese society. Currently, only one evaluation has been undertaken in China to determine the level of knowledge about autism. It found that only 57%-65% of Chinese citizens were aware of what autism is compared with 86%-91% of citizens from the United States, whilst 38% of Chinese participants endorsed and promoted negative autism stigma compared with 14% in the United States (Yu et al., 2020). Furthermore, research has indicated that, due to the stigma surrounding autism in China, only 9% of parents would seek out professional help if their child displayed symptoms of autism (Sun et al., 2015), whilst 80% of parents would choose to ‘wait and see’ if symptoms persisted (Huang et al., 2013) rather than have their child ‘exposed’ as autistic. Such attitudes are not surprising considering that, even within state-controlled media outlets, autism is wrongly identified as a childhood disorder, autistic people are categorised as either savants or inpatients in hospitals, and negative depictions of autistic people as a burden to society, or as unable to contribute to society in any meaningful way are prolific and represent the only official government stance disseminated amongst the Chinese population (Tang & Bie, 2016). Chinese societal views of disability and, by extension, autism, have meant that disabled people in China continue to be excluded and to be viewed as inharmonious burdens whose existence is, at best, begrudgingly tolerated. This attitude towards disability does not exist in isolation and permeates all aspects of Chinese society, including education.

2.3.2 Autism and the Chinese Education System

Within the past ten years, there has been an influx of research surrounding ASD in China (Clark et al., 2019). Despite first being recorded in China in 1982 (Tao, 1982), it was only as recently as 2006 that autism became recognised by the public and professionals alike, following its inclusion in the government's list of disabilities (Hu, 2019). Autism research, therefore, remains in its infancy in China, with most work being of a quantitative and medical nature, focused around the aetiology of autism and diagnostic developments in the field (Wang et al., 2019).

There is some qualitative literature about the education of autistic students in China and about the historical and recent developments and shortcomings of China's education system. Sun et al., (2013) conducted a comprehensive review of literature concerning educational provision for autistic students, highlighting the fact that these students remain discriminated against and excluded from public and special education. Further research corroborated these findings, drawing attention to the fact that government inclusion policies, designed to ensure the participation of autistic students in mainstream and special schools, were treated as non-mandatory guidelines, often ignored by individual schools (Sun et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018). Other research has documented the problems experienced by autistic students within the mainstream education system owing to the social difficulties they experience, the inflexibility of the Chinese education system, and the limited training on autism of teachers in China (Clark et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2016).

It is important to recognise that much of the existing literature concerning the education of autistic students in China is descriptive in nature and is limited to stating experiences, policies, and history. Work by Sun et al. (2013, 2019), whilst informative and valuable to the field of autism and education in China, does not go beyond recognising the unjust and inequitable position of autistic students. Some research, e.g., Huang and Wheeler (2007), attempts to fill this gap by offering solutions to the barriers facing autistic students. They argue that better awareness of autism, better training of teachers, the development of a formalised curriculum, and autism-friendly legislation and financial support could help create a more equitable and accessible education system for them (Huang & Wheeler, 2007). These solutions, however, are open to criticism for merely addressing the symptoms of an education system that does not value neurodiversity rather than challenging the Confucian philosophy underpinning a system which regards disabled students as ‘uneducable’ (Yuan et al., 2021).

This preliminary literature search and review revealed that most existing work draws upon autism in mainstream public and special education (e.g., Clark et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2013; Sun et al., 2013; Tong et al., 2019; Yi & Siu, 2020; Zhang et al., 2010), rather than with Chinese internationalised schools which is the focus of this thesis Some studies have conducted nascent investigations into autism within the wider realm of private education, however, these studies are confined to kindergartens (e.g., Xu Yun et al., 2018) which, given their well-established foundations, popularity, and high enrolment levels (Li et al., 2019; Wang, 2010) should, realistically, be considered an extension of the Chinese public education system. Furthermore, the findings of these studies are difficult to apply to a wider context due to the age range of kindergarten students in China (two to six years), and the fact that autism presents differently as an individual ages (Esbensen et al., 2009; Seltzer et al., 2003; Shattuck et al., 2007). The school experiences of an autistic kindergartener may be dramatically different to those of an autistic adolescent.

When examining pre-existing literature concerning public mainstream and special education or private education, it becomes apparent that, excluding medical research, most is investigating either teacher attitudes towards autistic children (Ballantyne et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2016; Lu et al., 2020) or the impact of various interventions on autistic students at school (Lee et al., 2019; Liao et al., 2020; McCabe, 2013). Very little research has drawn upon the voices of autistic students or engaged them as research participants. During this literature review, I found only one example of autistic students as participants in a study that addressed the role of school bullying in the development of various mental health problems commonly faced by autistic adolescents (Chou et al., 2020). Several studies have given a voice to the parents and families of autistic children in China (McCabe, 2007; McCabe-Hobart, 2008; Zhao & Fu, 2020), but these investigations have explored the perceived difficulties of having an autistic child rather than the difficulties of being autistic in a neurotypical society. The failure to include autistic people in research may stem from the stigma surrounding autism within Chinese society which considers autistic people to be incapable of making decisions for themselves or lacking the ability to articulate their lived experiences (a phenomenon referenced previously in this literature review, albeit in a different cultural context). The attitude that autistic people are somehow incapable extends throughout the education system and sees autistic students being ignored or unsupported in mainstream public schools (Liu et al., 2016), being neglected in special schools that cater predominantly for those with sensory impairments (Clark et al., 2019; LaValle, 2013), or being absent from schools altogether due to the stigma surrounding ASD in China (Huang & Wheeler, 2007; Wang et al., 2019). This literature review has revealed that the position of and outcomes for autistic people enrolled within the *traditional* public mainstream and special Chinese education system seem bleak. However, there has been no research focussed on the growing number of private education institutions that have a more holistic approach to education and could alleviate the difficulties faced by autistic students in the Chinese education system.

2.3.3 The Chinese Education System, Autism, and Internationalised Schools

As with other Confucian-heritage countries, education occupies a coveted position within Chinese society. Educational success has the potential to offer an individual and their family upward social mobility and better life prospects (Cheon, 2006; Hildebrand et al., 2008; Yen & Wu, 2015). In China, a large population fosters a competitive society and education system (Shirk, 2021), with the future for many students determined by examination results and their academic performance within formal education (Hill, 2013; Kirkpatrick & Zhang, 2011). It is important to reiterate that research suggests that disabled people (including those with ASD) have been systematically excluded from receiving a good quality public education (Deng & Manset, 2000; Hua, 2003; Xiao, 2003) because of societal attitudes towards their ‘impairments’ (Xu et al., 2018), inadequate levels of teacher training (Deng & Zhu, 2016; Ellsworth & Zhang, 2007), and limited knowledge of disability (Ma & Tan, 2010; Wang et al., 2012; Yu et al., 2011). The consequences of such exclusion are that disabled people have fewer life prospects than non-disabled people (Lin

& Yang, 2018; Stein, 2015), remain at the 'bottom' of society to be viewed as pitiful and needing of sympathy (Shang et al., 2011; Zheng et al., 2014), and are deprived of their voice in matters affecting themselves, their lives, and their education (Xu et al., 2018).

Despite rising levels of nationalism and isolationism that have been a defining feature of Xi Jinping's premiership, the popularity of alternative 'international' educational methods has increased dramatically amongst the Chinese population. From Montessori schools to schools taking a 'mastery learning' approach and to experimental schools that focus on learning through experience, the impact of 'international' (i.e. non-traditional Chinese) educational methods and programmes has continued to increase in China (Ma & Zhao, 2018; Poole, 2018). Whilst the nine-year compulsory education provided in China's public schools is renowned for its focus on academic success and for catering to the needs of 'traditional learners' (Xu et al., 2018), the Chinese 'international' education sector takes a different approach. 'International' education in China comprises two strands, international schools and internationalised schools. The differences between the two are subtle but essential to this thesis.

Whilst all teaching and learning within educational institutions in China is closely monitored by the government, international schools are not subject to the same laws and regulations. They do not fall under the jurisdiction of the Chinese government and are instead owned, operated, and administered by their respective home nations (Yan et al., 2015). An English international school operating in China, for example, would follow the English national curriculum, would be permitted to teach from textbooks that may not be approved for use within the Chinese education system, would teach in a pedagogical manner similar to schools in England, and would only allow non-Chinese passport holders to attend**.**

By contrast, internationalised schools are Chinese owned and operated private schools. Whilst still under the jurisdiction of the Chinese government, they have considerably more freedom than Chinese mainstream public or special schools. They have grown in popularity in recent years since they cater for the increasing number of Chinese middle-class parents who may have studied abroad themselves (Ma & Zhao, 2018) and who want a more internationally based education for their children (Poole, 2020). Many of these parents are also seeking to avoid the pressures placed on students by mainstream

Chinese public schools (Young, 2018). Whilst learning the core content of the Chinese curriculum, students at internationalised schools are permitted to supplement their education with foreign curricula in an environment which emphasises ‘western’ educational practices such as differentiated instruction, greater pastoral support, an increased focus on facilitated learning, and a variety of assessment options (Young, 2018). This approach is in stark contrast to the Chinese public-school system that relies on the infamous *zhongkao* and *gaokao* examinations which can, potentially, direct the life course of students (Kipnis, 2011; You, 2019).

This chapter has provided a brief outline of the history of autism, the way in which autism and autistic people are viewed by the predominant medical model and the developing social/rights model, how disability as a whole is viewed in China, and how autistic people are excluded within the Chinese education system, coupled with the difficulties that autistic students may experience within mainstream educational institutions (Martin et al., 2021). Enrolment in an establishment that is more student centred and accepting of differences, such as a Chinese internationalised school, may offer a better quality of education and better life outcomes than an exam-orientated system that, as research has shown, often fails to consider the needs of autistic students (Preece & Howley, 2018; Wood & Happé, 2020). An inclusive and social/rights approach to education is one which has been long sought after and desired by many autistic people within the People’s Republic of China. Such an approach may come in the form of the relatively modern phenomena of Chinese internationalised schools which have adopted a more student-centred methodology. Until this thesis, there has been little attention given in research circles to the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools are able to provide a socially just education to marginalised groups which, for the purposes of this thesis, comprises autistic students.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

Of paramount importance to this thesis is the concept of a socially just education. Research from within China and from the wider world suggests that this is not currently provided to autistic students who find themselves excluded from educational institutions (Huang & Wheeler, 2007; Wang et al., 2019). The provision of such an education for autistic students could, however, have the potential to lay the foundations of a more accessible society and better life opportunities for them. The thesis will now examine the concept of Critical Disability Theory (CDT) and will contend that a consideration of a socially just education through the lens of CDT is the appropriate path to take to determine what a socially just education should look like.

It could be argued that discussion of a CDT lens could have taken place under the heading of either the literature review (Chapter 2) or the methodology (Chapter 4). The fact that it does not is not because these areas are considered unimportant, nor is it designed to interrupt the flow of the thesis itself. It is, instead, designed to highlight the importance of CDT as the most appropriate framework within which to judge and evaluate the extent to which an education system or style of education is 'socially just', thereby determining whether that system or style is theoretically capable of effecting meaningful change in the education of autistic students.

In discussing this concept of 'evaluation' and CDT's existence as an evaluative framework, it is useful to include an operational definition of evaluation. In the case of this thesis, evaluation, as described by Saunders (2006), serves a 'means of giving voice to the disadvantaged, dispossessed, or disenfranchised and their actual and potential relationship with policy implementation' (p. 197). This notion of the purpose of evaluation is particularly useful to keep in mind especially as CDT is concerned precisely with these practices as will become clear during this chapter. Drawing upon Chelimskey's (1997) work as referenced in Saunders (2006), this thesis primarily utilises the evaluation perspectives of knowledge (that seeks to provide a deeper understanding to the field of autism education and disability in China), accountability (in measuring the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools are capable of providing this 'socially just' education that they elude to through the lens of CDT), and development (in utilizing CDT as an evaluative tool that is able to, on a theoretical level at least, strengthen the institutions of Chinese Internationalised schools in their ability to provide a socially just education for autistic students). By briefly exploring an operational definition of evaluation and highlighting the perspectives of evaluation adhered to in this thesis, one hopes that the 'voice' (Saunders, 2006) of the participants who exist as part of the evaluated institutions within this thesis is recognizable throughout.

3.1 Critical Disability Theory

Mladenov (2016) described disability as occupying a unique position in the field of social justice in that, unlike other areas relating to social justice, it is often neglected and overlooked by both critical theorists and social justice activists. This is a view that has persisted for some time in the field of disability studies. Davis (2002) expressed concern that whilst important issues such as racism and sexism understandably gain attention, disability was not considered important as a distinct category of oppression. For example, Mladenov (2016) notes that work by Fraser has explored issues of gender, sexuality, class, and race but not disability. Norwich (2013) argues that Sen's capability approach is incomplete in regard to disability issues, whilst Rawlsian contract theory has been criticised for seemingly ignoring issues pertaining to disability (Cureton, 2009).

Due to the tendency of activists and theorists, in the past, to exclude disabilities, it is the author's belief that the only frameworks appropriate for the analysis of issues relating to disabilities are those designed with the centring of disabilities in mind. CDT presents itself as an appropriate and relevant framework through which the critical study of disabilities can take place. Firstly, despite its use collaboratively with other critical theories (e.g. Annamma et al., 2013; Erevelles & Minear 2010), CDT centres disability, meaning that disability is not seen as an afterthought in the field of social justice (Hosking, 2008). Secondly, CDT holds itself accountable to those with disabilities (Minich, 2016). It positions itself, uniquely, as working with disabled people and for disabled people in matters relating to disability. It comprises a broad and diverse set of theoretical and practical approaches that study disability as a construct based in historical timeframes, and in social, political, and cultural attitudes towards disabilities (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Vehmas & Watson, 2014). In common with other critical theories, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Social Theory (CST), the use of the term critical reflects the theory's adherence to the Frankfurt school of social theory that seeks to "liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer, 1982, 244). Like traditional disability studies, CDT is based on the social model of disability which states that people with limitations or impairments are not necessarily disabled by their differences, but by societies' failure to account for, adapt to, and include those with impairments (Oliver, 2013; Oliver et al., 2012). This is in direct contrast to the medical model of disability which views the disabled person as needing fixing so as to conform to 'normal' values and adapt to society (Fisher & Goodley, 2007). Some critical disability theorists, however, raised concerns regarding the overly materialistic viewpoint of the social model of disability which is unable to accept the debilitating effect of an impairment on a disabled person (Crow, 1996; French, 1993; Morris, 1991). In response to this criticism, Carol Thomas (1999, 2007, 2010), designed a new approach to disability that is gaining popularity amongst theorists (Watson, 2012). Thomas's social *relational* model of disability views societal attitudes as a major factor in the cause of disability, but also recognises the disabling nature that impairments can have and always will have on disabled people, regardless of society. In the case of autistic people, whilst many of the difficulties faced on a day-to-day basis can be attributed to society and the environment in which one lives (Beardon, 2020, 2021), it must also be recognised that the fact of being autistic and one's internal autistic experience can be and is seen by some autistic people as an impairment in and of itself. CDT holds emancipation at the heart of its approach. It attempts both to describe societal constructs and to investigate the disabling nature of these constructs on those with impairments (Goodley et al., 2018). Although CDT makes clear that it is concerned with those who are devalued or disabled by society, many theorists refuse to adopt concrete criteria to determine who is classified as disabled. This may be due to the uniqueness of disability which, as highlighted by Garland-Thompson (2002), has the potential to affect anyone at any time and will affect everyone, should they be sufficiently long-lived. In recognition of this fact, CDT aims to deconstruct the artificial barriers and differences which it argues have been placed between abled and disabled (Shildrick, 2012). Goodley (2011, 113) believes that differences between abled and disabled people are socially produced for the non-disabled elite to retain dominance over those who are disabled. The problem, therefore, is not with the disabled person, but with the systems in place which are designed to reinforce the normality of the elite and to view those with disabilities as problems (Davis, 2010, 9).

Ultimately, the goal of CDT is the empowerment of disabled people in all aspects of life (Hosking, 2008; Devlin & Pothier, 2006, 8). However, empowerment can prove difficult to define, owing to the extensive use of the term in a wide variety of specialisms both inside and outside the fields of education and disability (e.g. Conger & Kanungo 1988). Rappaport (1984) suggests that empowerment is best described by the results of its absence, namely alienation and powerlessness (Dempsey & Foreman 1997). Using

Rappaport's (1984) description and a review of CDT literature, this thesis has identified two issues that alienate and disempower disabled people. They are:

1. A desire to reiterate normality which suggests that disabled people are somehow abnormal and in need of fixing (Garland-Thompson, 1996, 9; Kumari-Campbell, 2001, 44, 2008(a), 2008(b), 2009, 166; Goodley, 2009; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Tremain, 2017, 33 & 86; Wolbring, 2008). This viewpoint is consistent with the medical model of disability that, despite receiving much criticism, continues to be propagated in society (Haegele & Hodge, 2016).
2. An absence of the voice of the disabled in issues regarding disability, resulting in disabled people not being heard or given the chance to present their views. CDT concerns disability and so should involve those who are disabled (Charlton, 2006, 217-227; Goodley et al., 2017; Hosking, 2008; Reaume, 2014; Shildrick, 2015).

Although the above is hardly an exhaustive list, these issues have received significant attention in literature, and any progress towards addressing the issues of the alienation and disempowerment of disabled people would surely go a long way towards accomplishing the goals of CDT. Empowerment, as a goal of CDT, is key to establishing legitimate equality between abled and disabled people (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). Through the empowerment of disabled people, the socially constructed barriers separating the abled from the disabled can be broken down (as described by Shildrick, 2012) and the current bipolar situation of us and them (Vehmas & Watson, 2014), can be removed. According to CDT, the empowerment of disabled people would ultimately give them their voice in society, increase their ability to participate in the world and, most importantly, put control of their lives back in their hands (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). Whilst CDT has inspired many disability specific theoretical frameworks, it is recognised by theorists as unique in being the most comprehensive, well developed, and theoretically viable framework through which to view any and all disability. For this reason, Critical Autism Theory (CAT) which centres autism rather than disability as a whole and concerns itself with the *construction* of autism and the emancipation of autistic people (Milton & Ryan, 2023; O'Dell et al., 2016; Woods & Waldock, 2021) was, despite its importance, deemed to be insufficient for the purposes of this thesis. This was due to CAT's similarity to and basis in CDT coupled with its relative newness (Woods et al., 2018) which meant that CDT presented itself as a more complete framework, better able to critique institutions and the extent to which they are able to operate in a socially just manner and provide socially just services such as education. Moreover, as briefly mentioned in chapter 1 and in chapter 2 when discussing the absence of references to autism theories such as monotropism, it is important to remember that understanding of disability within China that has, until now, been viewed through a Chinese Confucianist and Chinese Communist lens does not lend itself readily to a CAT investigation owing to the fact that the power dynamics investigated from a CAT perspective that relate specifically to autism (Waltz, 2014; Woods et al., 2018) have not yet, within China, been considered from a broader disability standpoint (that autism falls under) that CDT is positioned to explore. Simply put, a CDT lens was deemed more viable for this thesis than a CAT one lest this thesis attempt to 'run before it can walk.'

3.2 A Socially Just Education

As previously outlined, according to CDT the reiteration of normality and the absence of a disabled voice are two of the main reasons why disabled people remain marginalised in society as a whole and in various institutions within it. It makes sense, therefore, that the promotion of a socially just society or institution through the lens of CDT would involve the empowerment of disabled people through the acceptance and awareness of difference as opposed to the reiteration of normality, and by recognising disabled voices in matters concerning the disabled individual rather than stifling those voices and preventing disabled people from taking ownership and agency over their own lives. According to CDT, therefore, education can only be considered socially just if it allows, accepts, and accommodates difference within its system, and if it allows disabled students to have a voice in matters pertaining to their disability, their education, and the way in which their disability interacts with both their own education and with the education system as a whole. It may be argued that defining and achieving the concept of a socially just education system through these two aims alone is not possible. However, since these two aims represent the primary areas of struggle for disabled people, all other realms of struggle could, according to CDT, be subsumed within them.

For example, for the few autistic students currently enrolled within the Chinese public school system, their academic and, consequently, life success rests almost exclusively on the *zhongkao* and *gaokao* (middle school and high school) examinations that all students are required to take. These examinations allow entry into the most prestigious high schools and universities, and, if a favourable result is achieved, provide better life opportunities (Pires & Duarte, 2019). However, as previously described, autistic students are less likely to succeed in a high stakes and stressful examination dominated education system (Fleury et al., 2014; Keen et al., 2016; Wood & Happé, 2020). The fact that autistic students are still subject to the same examinations and expectations as their neurotypical peers, despite the well-documented difficulties that they may have in thriving in such an environment, serves as an example of how 'normal' educational practices are reiterated and how autistic students are simply expected to adapt to an environment that is not suitable for them and does not consider the autistic experience. Whilst any number of reasons or combination of reasons may be responsible for this particular example of autistic disadvantage, it is not a discrete category of disempowerment that CDT has overlooked. Rather, it is an example of a situation where, consciously or otherwise, normality is reiterated. In other words, this specific example of social injustice is not categorised by the reasons behind its causation, but by its consequences and outcomes (i.e. the reiteration of normality).

The absence of a disabled voice in matters relating to disability is related to the reiteration of normality and the consequent failure of society to accommodate disability, but there are some important differences between these two forms of disempowerment. As is illustrated by the example of autistic students in an exam orientated system, the reiteration of normality, within the realm of education, is primarily the result of conscious or unconscious actions taken or not taken to maintain the powerful position occupied by the 'normal' elite. The absence of a disabled voice, however, represents the conscious or unconscious *decision* that disabled people are incapable of taking agency over their education, the education system and educational policy that serves them, and, consequently, their own lives. For example, research investigating the higher education prospects of disabled students in China, including some autistic students, reported that, despite overcoming the challenges of an education system that does not consider the needs of autistic people and despite successfully navigating middle and high school examinations, disabled students were still more likely to be the victims of both intentional and unintentional exclusion (Li et al., 2021). Likewise, investigations into the higher education prospects of the wider disabled population in China found that the existence of a diagnosis of disability excluded students from certain fields of study, only granted them access to poorly funded ‘disabled’ universities, or, in many cases, barred them from entry into university altogether (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Although it may seem that these barriers represent a desire to reiterate normality rather than to exclude a disabled voice, the fact that, in many cases, disabled students have met the standards of a ‘normal’ education and have achieved ‘success’ without there being support in place, only to be denied access to educational institutions because of their disability, suggests that the decision that disabled people are incapable has been made regardless of any actions on their part . Simply put, a disabled person may well succeed in an education system that does not accommodate disability, but such success does not mean that the disabled voice is heard or valued. The actions, success, and voice of the disabled may simply be disregarded as a result of their disability. Achieving the standard of ‘normal’ is only part of the struggle when the very existence of a disability precludes further progress, and the disabled voice, whether spoken through words or actions, is simply not enough to access all aspects of society. The reiteration of normality and the absence of a disabled voice are separate challenges that CDT seeks to address and rectify. It is important to recognise, however, that they are intrinsically linked and exist in symbiosis with each other. The reiteration of normality contributes to the stifling of the disabled voice, and the absence of a disabled voice around issues relating to education and educational policy ensures that a non-disabled narrative and, consequently, the reiteration of normality continue to thrive.

It is not the aim of this thesis to identify specific socially just practices within the context of Chinese internationalised schools, nor would it be practical to do so. Whilst specific practices can be identified as inherently unjust, the extent to which a practice can be regarded as socially just depends not on the practice itself, but on the culture that prevails as a result of the interaction between practices, and on how far that culture goes towards eliminating the reiteration of normality and the absence of a disabled voice. This thesis adheres to the viewpoint that has long been identified within CDT and within the field of education that the concept of a socially just and inclusive education does not exist as either a service to be provided or a concept of ‘best practice’ to be implemented following a professional development session, but rather as a culture and philosophy that disrupts and challenges pre-existing normative ableist thought and practices and that establishes, instead, meaningful access to, and support, belonging, and acceptance within educational institutions and educational policy (Ashby, 2012; Grenier, 2010; Mutua & Smith, 2016; Oyler, 2011; Rood & Ashby, 2020; Routel, 2012; Young & Mintz, 2008).

To that end, it is essential that this thesis focusses on the thoughts and lived experiences of autistic students attending a specific type of school, namely Chinese internationalised schools, and on the teachers teaching at them in order to understand whether or not these schools, whilst they may differ in their specific practices, are capable of creating a culture that accepts and values autism as a difference or disability and recognises the importance of and values the autistic voice in matters relating to education and educational policy. Although a CDT lens has been discussed from both a wider and more thesis-specific perspective, it is important to reiterate that this thesis is concerned with autism alone, and to emphasise that an evaluation of whether or not Chinese internationalised schools are able to provide a socially just education for autistic students cannot be accurately extended to other disabilities or differences or as a one-size fits all solution to the disability-wide struggle that falls within the purview of CDT. Each individual disability is a complex field of study in its own right, and presuming that an educational culture that benefits autistic people would also benefit individuals with Down's Syndrome, for example, is just as damaging and discriminatory as the reiteration of normality and the absence of a disabled voice. That being said, one could be optimistic that the acceptance of a specific disability, the valuing of the disabled voice, and the creation of a culture that values a specific disability would bode well for the wider disabled population and would represent a metaphorical 'foot in the door' for all disabled people regardless of their disability.

Thus far, chapter 2 of this thesis has outlined the literature surrounding autism, models of autism, and the concepts of disability, autism, education, Confucianism within Chinese society, and the concept of Chinese internationalised schools whilst chapter 3 has introduced CDT and the concept of a socially just education. These chapters have highlighted the current state of autism educational research in China and have explained the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis. In forthcoming chapters, CDT will be utilised to contribute to pre-existing autism educational research in China to provide an answer to the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools can provide autistic students with a more 'socially just' education.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter will detail the philosophical position of this thesis and will centre interpretative phenomenology and a qualitive methodological approach to answering the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. It will then explain and evaluate the choice of semi-structured interviews as the research method used to uncover the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools can offer autistic students a more socially just education. Following this, the eligibility criteria and the demographics of the participants recruited to take part in the research will be outlined, coupled with a thorough description of the ethical process used to protect them. As well as outlining my positionality as a researcher, this chapter will address the concept of reflexivity and the steps taken to uncover valid findings from a thematic approach to data analysis.

4.1 Methodological Assumptions

As with any piece of research, this thesis is informed by a specific set of ontological and epistemological assumptions which, in turn, are informed by my own beliefs in relation to research, the purpose of research, what research can uncover, and how research should be conducted. Ontology refers to the philosophical concept of 'being' as well as to the related notions of existence and reality (Ylönen & Aven, 2023). Epistemology, on the other hand, concerns itself with knowledge, what can be known, and the origin, nature, and scope of knowledge (Ejnavarzala, 2019). From a research perspective, ontology defines one's research framework whilst epistemology concerns itself with what can be known or uncovered through using that particular framework (Al-Ababneh, 2020). The interaction, therefore, between ontology and epistemology cannot be understated. It is this onto-epistemological relationship that defines any and all avenues of research, regardless of topic, field, or discipline. Owing to the fact that the ontological and epistemological foundations of research transcend disciplines (for example the sciences and social sciences), it is not surprising that a broad division exists around the very nature of knowledge and the concepts of objective knowledge and subjective knowledge (Baise, 2020). As the concepts of objective and subjective knowledge are inherently opposed to each other, so too are the paradigms of positivism and interpretivism that have developed because of the discussions and debates that have arisen due to the dualistic schism mentioned above. These two paradigms will be discussed in turn and will be followed by an introduction to my own interpretative phenomenological position.

Positivism is an empirical philosophical world view and approach to research that posits that the only true or factual knowledge or, indeed, the only knowledge worth knowing is that which can be uncovered or learned about through observation or measurement (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Saunders et al., 2012; Scotland, 2012). In the case of positivism, observation or measurement is a rather broad term, but refers to the concept that science and the seven-step scientific method of; Questioning, Research, Hypothesis, Experimenting, Data Analysis, Conclusion, and Communication is the only way in which the truth surrounding any given topic can be garnered (Saunders et al., 2012). Any line of enquiry that veers away from this process is purely subjective and cannot be considered as true with any validity. From a positivist researcher's viewpoint, the role of the researcher is limited to that of an independent data collector and interpreter who, whilst involved in the research processes of research design, data collection and data analysis, remains removed from the experimental process itself and has minimal interaction with participants when conducting the experiment (Park et al., 2020). To paraphrase Hacking (1983), positivism, in its most basic sense, can be seen as a set of six principles described below:

1. The logic behind scientific inquiry is the same regardless of the discipline.
2. Science is concerned with explaining and predicting a given phenomenon.
3. All knowledge is testable, and research needs to be grounded in empiricism. Deduction is used to develop a hypothesis which is proven or disproven through evidence-based findings. This evidence must be observed, and compelling. Arguments or 'common sense' is insufficient as evidence.
4. Relating to the previous point, 'common sense' has no place in positivist research.
5. Science knows no viewpoint and exists to uncover universal laws governed by logic rather than morality, politics, or any other external value.
6. For a universal law to be true, experiments must be replicable under any circumstance.

(Hacking, 1983: 41-42)

In this thesis, the principles of positivism are illustrated by the medical model of autism that was discussed thoroughly in the literature review. The medical and scientific approach towards autism and autistic people in China and in the wider world is inherently positivist and remains the preferred approach of the majority of medical researchers, psychiatrists, and psychologists who specialise in autism (Glynne-Owen, 2010; Kourti, 2021).

In contrast to positivism, interpretivism posits that reality is subjective and socially constructed, and exists not as one definitive truth but as an infinite number of equally valid truths that can only be understood from the experience of the individual in question (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020). Developed through the critique of positivist assumptions, interpretivism refuses to accept that the study of human beings can be conducted by considering them as indistinguishable from any other physical phenomena (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Interpretivism places significant value on the lived experiences of the individual including their cultural experiences, the circumstances in which they find themselves, the time and place in which they live, and, ultimately, what constitutes a given person's or group's social reality (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). In rejecting knowledge relating to the human world, interpretivism moves away from the foundations and universal laws propounded by the positivist tradition and believes that research is not intended to be used to provide sweeping generalisations, but instead is needed in order to produce a rich insight into the world from the perspective of an individual or group whose lived experiences of a particular phenomenon, and the documentation of these experiences, can better explain the phenomenon in question (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

As the field of education is firmly entrenched within the social sciences (Friedenberg, 1951) and as this thesis is concerned with qualitative data, it may be fairly evident that I have adopted an interpretivist position when conducting my research. As an autistic person investigating the experiences of autistic people, I am vehemently opposed to the positivist exploration of autism. This is not simply because of the inherent criticisms of positivism that I, as an interpretivist, will always have, but is due primarily to the objectification of autistic people that results from traditionally positivist disciplines and fields of study or research. The treatment of autism as a medical mystery, as a perversion of normality, or as a condition needing to be cured because it does not conform to societal expectations fails to recognise the validity of the experiences of autistic people living in a world that is not designed for them. An interpretivist approach should not be rejected to make way for further positivist aetiological studies which may, at best, explain why autism exists but not how it feels to be autistic or, at worst, propose a ‘cure’ for autism and a pathway for the destruction of an entire community and their culture, communication, experiences, and understanding of the world.

Having identified why I am inclined to subscribe to an interpretivist viewpoint, it is important to highlight that interpretivism does not exist as one unified position. There are a variety of interpretivist approaches, with the three most popular perspectives being hermeneutics, concerned with the interpretation and understandings of texts (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009; McManus Holroyd, 2007; Smith, 1991; Williams, 2000); symbolic interaction, that investigates the way that individuals use symbolism within social contexts (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009); and interpretative phenomenology that was deemed most appropriate for this thesis and will now be discussed in greater detail.

Interpretative phenomenology (henceforth referred to phenomenology for ease) is concerned with identifying and understanding people’s perceptions of the world and the context or situation that they find themselves in. It seeks to identify and describe a given phenomenon by investigating it from the perspective of those who have experienced and continue to experience it (Teherani et al., 2015) and aims to uncover the exact phenomena that was experienced and the way it was experienced. Whilst not embedded within the camp of critical theory, phenomenology is compatible with critical theory in that it is capable of clarifying the structures that a given critical theory (in the case of this research, CDT) seeks to alleviate. This position of clarifying structures has led to research recommending that those compatible lines of dialog be kept open (Procyshyn, 2020). Phenomenology lends itself perfectly as a foundation for the research that forms the basis of this thesis because there is no previous research in existence which focusses on the ability of Chinese internationalised schools to provide a more socially just education to autistic students. The novelty of this field of investigation means that any phenomena experienced, and the way a given phenomenon is experienced has not previously been uncovered or identified. This will now be achieved by applying a phenomenological approach to the research. To be able to assess the extent to which autistic students are provided with a socially just education depends on the experiences of the autistic student themselves, and on the explicit or implicit attitudes of others towards them that shape their experiences. By examining subjective experiences that have either been lived by an autistic student or been identified as a genesis for those lived experiences from a phenomenological position, new understandings, appreciations, and meanings can be formed or re-formed, and a more complete understanding can be given to the experience or experiences (Laverty, 2003; Neubauer et al., 2019). As my own strictly interpretivist position makes it impossible for me to engage with traditions that may see themselves as a bridge between positivism and interpretivism, interpretative phenomenology posits itself as the most suitable approach to clarify, describe, and understand human experience as it exists in its most raw and unfiltered sense (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). In contrast to pure hermeneutics which relies on a reflective rather than a living interpretation and on the concept of a ‘correct’ interpretation rather than allowing an individual to attach their own meaning (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009) and symbolic interactionism which focusses on interpreting a new subjective meaning of a given event that stems not from one's own experience of the event but from the symbol that arises when an experience is deemed valid and mutually agreed upon (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009), phenomenology is concerned with the pre-reflective, individually determined experience and meaning of an event that remains understood purely in the context of one's own *lifeworld* (see Apostolescu & Marino, 2022), unencumbered with the requirement that if an experience is to be considered valid it must be mutually agreed upon (Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenology therefore remains free to investigate, uncover, and assign meaning to the lived experiences of the autistic students identified in this thesis without any preconceived notions or parameters in place that may restrict or nullify those experiences. Interpretative phenomenology allows for lived experiences to be expressed and recognised as undiluted and unrestricted truths that, in accordance with the interpretivist position, constitute one's own socially constructed reality.

4.2 Research Methods

This thesis has seen me employ a qualitative approach to research and research design. Qualitative research, though a rich term, can be broadly described as a naturalistic approach to understanding a given social phenomena in the phenomena’s natural setting (Bryman, 1988; Bryman et al., 2022; Nassaji, 2020). Distancing itself from the scientifically and numerically grounded traditions of quantitative research, qualitative research relies less on the formulation of experimental designs and the successful identification of an independent variable, and more on uncovering the processual and socially constructed reality of an individual or individuals through a developing closeness between researcher and participant, through more unstructured and ‘social’ research methods, and through an idiographic understanding of an individual and their experiences with a given phenomenon (Bryman, 1988; Bryman et al., 2022). For the purposes of this thesis and from an interpretative phenomenological standpoint, qualitative research methods provide an opportunity to gain a clear understanding of the experiences of autistic students within the Chinese internationalised schools they attend. Qualitative research methods offer the chance for participants themselves to explain their thoughts, feelings, and truth surrounding a given experience, resulting in a rich understanding of that experience that is taken directly from the participant themselves, rather than an understanding of a given experience being limited to quantifiable ‘facts’ (Cleland, 2017; Foley & Timonen 2015).

In order to gain a more complete understanding of the experiences of autistic students within Chinese internationalised schools and in an attempt to answer the research question, ‘To what extent are Chinese internationalised schools able to provide a more socially just education to autistic students,’ a variety of qualitative research methods were considered. Initially, it was thought that unstructured interviews and focus groups would be the most appropriate methods owing to their ability to facilitate in-depth conversation, to put participants at ease, to generate rich and meaningful data not constrained by specific lines of questioning, and to provide for as natural a conversation or, in the case of focus groups, a discussion as possible (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Bihu, 2020; Castillo-Montoya, 2016; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Sagoe, 2012). However, following a deeper investigation into the limited literature concerning conducting qualitative research with autistic people, and taking into account issues such as the well-documented difficulties that autistic people have with social communication and with changes to routine and the fact that these difficulties, integral to autism, have the potential to cause anxiety or discomfort for autistic participants taking part in qualitative research (Beresford et al., 2004; Harrington et al., 2014; Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Preece, 2002; Preece & Jordan, 2010), it was felt that the unstructured nature of these proposed interviews and focus groups would not be appropriate. That decision was reinforced by a period of reflection on my own positionality as an autistic researcher for whom unstructured interviews and focus groups would also provide too many challenges, thus limiting their effectiveness and, from a researcher's position, the effectiveness of my own involvement in the research. The obvious solution to this problem might seem to be to add structure to the interviews and focus groups. Further investigation, however, established that although semi-structured interviews would be an appropriate qualitative research method, semi-structured focus groups would not. Whilst a phenomenological focus group is not oxymoronic by default (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2009), such a method does require an individual within the focus group to have the freedom to, in the words of Bradbury-Jones et al. (2009), 'describe their experiences in an uncontaminated way.' It could be argued that the very act of adding further structure to a research method that is already more structured than an interview does inherently 'contaminate' the descriptions of the participants as they become more concerned with addressing the topic at hand in a manner that is conducive to the group discussion, rather than being able to truly express and describe their own lived experiences. For these reasons, semi-structured interviews alone were used to investigate the experiences of autistic students attending Chinese internationalised schools, and the experiences of teachers employed at Chinese internationalised schools together with their opinions of working with autistic students.

For full 'participatory research' that includes autistic participant perspectives on *how* research is conducted (Chown et al., 2017), it may have been beneficial to provide participants with the ability to choose from a research method that suited them. This possibility however was not viable owing to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that had resulted in restrictions in China that were only just being scaled back when this research was taking place. Furthermore, my position as a relatively new academic researcher and as an autistic person who struggles specifically with social communication, meant that 'task switching' and adopting different research personas that would have been needed to be adopted had participants chosen from a range of research methods would have been 'too much' for me to be able to handle during this point in my research career. Whilst the specific reasons why semi-structured interviews were chosen as the research method for this thesis has been referenced in the previous paragraph and will be highlighted in the coming sub-section of this chapter, it could be useful for a reader of this thesis to keep the following in mind; Semi-structured interviews have long been considered a solid and appropriate research method when working with autistic people due to their flexibility, on one hand, and structure, on the other, that have helped include autistic people in research (Cridland et al., 2015). This alone, coupled with the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and my position as an autistic researcher meant that semi-structured interviews served as an appropriate, inclusive, and participatory research method for this thesis.

4.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews have long been a respected qualitative research method employed by those operating from an interpretative phenomenological perspective (Balushi, 2016). They present researchers with a method that is powerful in its ability to uncover participant thoughts and opinions surrounding a given experience, is flexible and free enough to allow a participant to expand upon a given point or to allow a researcher to delve deeper into a line of questioning, and is enough of a ‘middle ground’ between structured interviews at one end and unstructured interviews at the other to circumnavigate both the ‘stiffness’ and formality or the awkwardness and ‘looseness’ that often come with interview methods that lie on either end of the continuum (Adams, 2015; Brown & Danaher, 2017; Cohen et al., 2018). For the purposes of this research, semi-structured interviews were particularly useful as they provided participants with the opportunity to discuss and describe individual experiences, thoughts, and beliefs. They were able to expand upon any aspect of the interview if they wished to do so, but its semi-structured nature also offered them a form of protection from incidences arising that may cause distress. Participants were aware that an interview script was readily available to serve as a transitionary device between questions (a list of interview questions asked is available in appendix 8 for student participants and appendix 9 for teacher participants), thus taking the pressure away from them to finish or continue a line of questioning in a succinct manner when they had nothing more to say, As this research was investigating the thoughts and experiences of autistic students, and of teachers who may teach them, it was important to develop two separate lines of questioning to take into account the differences between these two groups of participants. In some cases, questions underwent very little or no change. Other questions, however, had to be reconceptualised and completely rewritten. For example, it would have been unproductive to ask a non-autistic teacher whether they believed they were supported in their school as an autistic teenager. These differing lines of questioning allowed the interviews to uncover the experiences of the separate groups of participants and ensured that the experiences and attitudes as disclosed by the participants, were relevant to the research. A great deal of effort was made to ensure that the questions the participants were asked would allow them to express their thoughts and experiences with as much detail as they deemed appropriate, without wasting their time.

In facilitating the interview process and in helping participants collect their thoughts and formulate responses to a particular line of enquiry, the questions asked were grouped into sections. These sections investigated (1) the concept of valuing autism and/or being valued as an autistic student within Chinese internationalised schools; (2) the quality of education provided to autistic students and the extent to which this education can lead to meaningful opportunities; and (3) difference and attitudes towards difference that exist within the school community. Although these sections may seem vague, it is important to remember that they exist as three categories only in this written thesis. Participants were not provided with the detail of these three abstract areas of concern but were simply asked a series of questions that could then be collapsed into these three sections for ease of presentation. It is also important to recognise that the creation of these three sections ensured that I was able to view reported participant experiences through the lens of critical disability theory. It is through the lens of CDT, with its focus on the disabling phenomena of the reiteration of normality in society and on the absence of a disabled voice that the findings of this research will be determined.

Twenty interviews were conducted. In keeping with emerging trends that aim to promote ‘autism friendly research’ by, for example, being flexible in the way research is conducted, and allowing for and promoting the existence of differences in participants’ communication preferences (e.g. Cage & Howes, 2020; Vincent, 2019), participants were given the choice to be interviewed in any way that suited them including face-to-face, online, a combination of face-to-face and online, and through electronic messaging. The preferred option of all the participants was for an online interview and accordingly all the interviews took place online using *Zoom Video Communications Inc.* and *Microsoft Teams* and all were audio recorded. There were a number of other factors making online interviews particularly appropriate including the effects of the COVID 19 pandemic that saw travel to and within the Chinese mainland severely restricted, the geographical size of China that makes face-to-face meetings difficult, the busy lives of the participants who, as teachers or students, have little time for physical meetings, and the fact that the very nature of autism can make face-to-face interviews difficult, particularly if attending an interview involves either travelling to an unfamiliar location or inviting an unfamiliar person into a familiar location. Although the limitations of online interviewing have been well documented, for example struggles with technology (Namey et al., 2020), the inherent price wall that must be overcome to engage in an online interview (Lobe et al., 2022), and difficulties in detecting participant distress or meaning (Lobe et al., 2022), it was deemed to be more important to ensure that the participants were comfortable in being interviewed and that they had a sense of involvement and agency in the research they were involved in. Furthermore, as a consequence of the COVID 19 pandemic that took place as this thesis was being written, using online programmes for work, school, and communication is no longer seen as a second or least favourable choice. Indeed, research has suggested that a lasting legacy of the pandemic could be the continued use of online technology for the conducting of interviews. Researchers have been forced to confront and overcome the perceived limitations of online interviewing, and research participants, like the wider general population, have had significant experience with online conversations be it for work, school, or otherwise (Lobe et al., 2022). Of the interviews conducted, the shortest lasted for forty-one minutes with the longest lasting for one hour and forty-three minutes. The mean interview time across all twenty participants was recorded as one hour and six minutes.

4.3 Participant Sampling & Demographics

Since this thesis is inherently focussed on the educational experiences and outcomes of autistic students, it should be of no surprise that they would be included as participants. However, it was also essential that the research should include teachers who teach within the Chinese internationalised school sector, since it is they who are ‘doing’ the educating and they who are also engaged in establishing the symbiotic and cyclical relationship of a particular school culture and the institutional and pedagogical practices that take place within the school environment. Furthermore, the inclusion of teachers as participants was deemed necessary owing to the authority that they possess in the classroom (Buzelli & Johnston, 2001; Graça et al., 2013), particularly in China where research has suggested that an authoritative educational style leads to the establishment of a hierarchical structure within Chinese classrooms in which the teacher sets the agenda and has the power to shape a child's formal educational experience depending on whether or not the child adheres to school and teacher-imposed norms, expectations, and behaviours (Huang et al., 2019; Jia et al., 2009; Shi et al., 2021).

To be considered eligible for inclusion in this research, teacher and student participants had to meet a certain number of additional criteria. These criteria and the rationale behind them will now be discussed.

Student participants had firstly to have a formal diagnosis of autism, secondly to be between the ages of fifteen and eighteen, and thirdly to be currently enrolled as a student at an internationalised school within the *political* rather than *geographical* mainland of the People's Republic of China. The need for participants to have a formal diagnosis of autism does not come from a desire to de-legitimize the experiences of those who have self-diagnosed as autistic, nor does this requirement in any way suggest that all of those who have self-diagnosed as autistic are not autistic.

The need for participants to be aged between fifteen and eighteen was included to ensure that the interviews would be as comfortable and as informative as possible. Research has indicated that a common pitfall when interviewing younger children or adolescents is the reluctance of the children to engage in the interview process for a variety of reasons including shyness, a lack of familiarity between the child and the researcher, and, in some cases, only agreeing to an interview due to pressure, perceived or real, from parents, teachers, or even the interviewer themselves (Adler et al., 2019; Folque, 2020; Kutrovátz, 2017; Lund et al., 2016). In addition, due to the possible existence of power imbalances, differences in cognitive development levels between a child participant and a researcher, differences in communication skills, and differences in a child's ability to verbalise their own world view compared with the ability and interpretative skills of an adult (Kutrovátz, 2017), it was deemed that the most appropriate option for this thesis was to conduct the research with older adolescents. Another factor informing the decision to establish an age range for the student participants came from the fact that, as discussed in the literature review, the limited research that has been conducted in China with autistic participants has often taken place in kindergartens. This piece of research, therefore, provided an opportunity to investigate the experiences of autistic students from the opposite end of the school age continuum. Furthermore, it was felt that older students would be able to give a more reflective and richer detailing of their thoughts, perceptions, and experiences at a Chinese internationalised school than if they had only been attending school for a shorter period. Finally, whilst a discussion concerning the ethical implications of conducting research with autistic people is forthcoming in this chapter, the very fact that this research was looking to recruit autistic students as participants was also a consideration in the decision to impose an age requirement. Due to the nature of autism, which was discussed in the literature review, the challenges of conducting qualitative research with younger children that I have already addressed, and a consideration of my own circumstances as an autistic researcher, I concluded that to conduct interviews with younger autistic children would be too challenging a task for me to undertake. The final requirement that student participants be attending an internationalised school within the Chinese *political* mainland stems from the fact that this research is concerned with the experiences of autistic students enrolled in schools of this specific type. Specifying the *political* as opposed to the *geographic* Chinese mainland reflects the fact that the education system in place on the Chinese island of Hainan, for example, is the same as the education system in Beijing, whilst the education system in the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, which, *geographically,* forms part of the Chinese mainland, is, *politically*, an entirely separate system.

In order for a teacher participant to be deemed eligible for participation in this research, they had to be working as a teacher in a Chinese internationalised school and be a Chinese national. As previously addressed in the literature review, there is a clear distinction in China between an international school and an internationalised school. An English international school in China, for example, is, for all intents and purposes, an extension of the English education system. It admits English students or students who are seeking an education based on the English curricula and follows the guidelines, rules, and regulations put forward by the Department of Education. In contrast, one of the curiosities of Chinese internationalised schools is that they offer a ‘flavour’ of international education and provide students with access to international curricula whilst still retaining their status as majority Chinese owned and operated and under the scrutiny of the Chinese education department (Ma & Zhao, 2018; Poole, 2020). Whilst it may have been interesting to hear the views of non-Chinese teachers working in Chinese internationalised schools (of whom there are many), it was beyond the scope of this thesis to do so. Chinese internationalised schools are still very much under the jurisdiction of the Chinese Education Department. As a result, non-Chinese teachers, whilst professionals in their field, have little impact on the pedagogical approaches or cultural practices within them. To have included non-Chinese teachers within the scope of this research would have run the risk of changing the focus away from the study of the schools themselves. For this reason, only Chinese nationals, who have teaching qualifications and can make an impact on the culture within a school, were considered eligible for participation. As in the case of student participants, teacher participants had to be employed in a Chinese internationalised school within the *political* rather than *geographical* mainland of the People's Republic of China.

It is also important to note that all participants, whether teachers or students, completed the interviews in English. Whilst this was not a requirement for participation, most Chinese internationalised schools, and all the schools from which participants were drawn for this research, use both English and Chinese as dual languages of instruction and do so, usually, from the age of two. My presentation as a British interviewer and researcher, and the participants' higher levels of linguistic competence in English compared with mine in Mandarin, meant that being able to engage in an interview in English was, on reflection, a *de facto* requirement to participation. That being said, the participants were not told that they had to use English exclusively and some participants did switch comfortably between English and Mandarin during the interview.

For qualitative research, especially qualitative research of a phenomenological nature, there has been some debate regarding the ideal sample size for research of this essence to take place. Creswell & Poth (2017), for example, suggest between five to twenty-five participants whilst Morse (2018) recommends a minimum of six. It has been suggested however that there exists no correct answer concerning the number of participants who should be recruited for phenomenologically based research (Bartholomew et al., 2021; Simth et al., 2009; Giorgi, 2009), with the number of participants dependent, instead, on the nature of the research and research question(s). What does seem to be universally agreed upon, however, is the fact that phenomenological traditions do indicate that sample sizes should be relatively small (Bartholomew et al., 2021) so as to deal with faster levels of saturation that stem from the need, according to Giorgi (2009) cited in Bartholomew et al. (2021), to 'fully voice participants' expressed consciousness' within each, in this case, interview that takes place. Based on these recommendations, my research involved a sample size of twenty participants split between ten students and ten teachers.

Despite research suggesting that the prevalence of autism in China is either slightly below or comparable to western and world-wide prevalence (Sun et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2020), cultural attitudes towards autism in China, the level of knowledge of and identification of autism in China, and the anxiety and uncertainty that can accompany a willingness to divulge one's autism diagnosis even in the comparatively more informed western world (Hill, 2004) all mean that the potential to recruit participants for this study was limited. Moreover, the requirement for students to attend a Chinese internationalised school and the age range imposed on student participants further decreased the potential population of this study to no more than an estimated few thousand. To overcome this issue, I relied upon my position as an autistic person with connections to a number of informal and unofficial 'internationally minded' autistic support groups based within China, using my membership of these groups (as a member utilising support services rather than as a professional providing support) to recruit participants. 'Internationally minded' support groups, rather than strictly Chinese support groups were used because, as previously discussed in the literature review, Chinese parents who send their children to Chinese internationalised schools tend to distance themselves somewhat from traditional Chinese perspectives towards education and possess a more eclectic and international mindset, often based on their own experiences of life outside China. A call for participation was issued through the Chinese messaging and social media application *WeChat* (see appendix 2 for a copy of the message sent) and was sent to the aforementioned groups. The parents of interested participants then contacted me directly for more information. Although these issues will be addressed more comprehensively in the forthcoming part of this chapter entitled; '*Ethics, ethical reflexivity, and positionality*,' I believe that my own status as an autistic person and my non-professional membership of these autistic support groups did much to galvanise interest in this research, especially from the parents of participants who, on multiple occasions, expressed their surprise and excitement that their children would be engaged in a piece of autism research conducted by an autistic researcher. Whilst it would have been preferable to have a representative sample of autistic students, of the ten student participants recruited, only one was female. This ratio is not in keeping with the traditional 4:1 male to female ratio frequently cited in literature

(Dimech, 2021). That being said, owing to the paucity of knowledge about autism in China compared with, for example, the United Kingdom or the United States, together with research that has indicated a far greater gender imbalance between males and females diagnosed with autism in mainland China (Wang et al., 2018; Zhou et al., 2020), it is not surprising that males may have been over-represented in this research compared to the situation that might have arisen had the research taken place in another nation more in line with the global gender prevalence of autism. Furthermore, owing to the limited population of potential participants and the specific type of schools from which they could be chosen, little could have been done to make this sample more representative. Whilst this is not a problem in and of itself, it is still worth recognising, especially when looking to the future of autism research in China and the avenues that future studies could explore.

In the recruitment of teacher participants, a call for participation was once again issued through *WeChat* (see appendix 3 for a copy of the message sent), though this time the message was sent to several large, internationalised teacher groups within China. Convenience or opportunistic sampling was employed in selecting participants on a 'first come, first served' basis, not because of a concern that any other form of sampling would lead to too few participants (as was the rationale behind using convenience or opportunistic sampling with student participants), but because the number of responses received far exceeded the number of participants required. In the case of this research, convenience sampling is logically justified because the 'sample universe' from which both students and teachers were drawn was specific enough to avoid any possibility of making broad sweeping claims as to the experiences or attitudes of either teachers or autistic students in general within mainland China (Robinson, 2014). Teacher participants comprised seven females and three males. This was in line with expectations, especially since research has indicated that the gender disparity in Chinese schools continues to grow, with female teachers making up the majority of the teaching workforce (Zhou, 2023). A disparity also existed concerning the geographical regions of China represented for both teacher and student participants. The majority of teachers and students either worked at or attended schools in eastern China, whilst western and central China were underrepresented. The most likely explanation for these differences in geographical representation comes from the socio-economic makeup of China as a nation. Eastern China is, for example, significantly more wealthy as a region than any other part of China, with western and central China being some of the least wealthy (Yan & Mohd, 2023). It is unsurprising that eastern China, with its greater numbers of internationalised schools, is overrepresented, given the cost of sending a child to an internationalised school, coupled with the tendency of internationalised schools to open in wealthier areas. The overrepresentation is in keeping with the wealth and development disparities that exist between the different geographical regions of China.

Before turning attention towards the ethics of this research, it is important to outline the need to describe the participants fully. Both student and teacher participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities and provide anonymity, and all gave consent for their data to be recorded. In relation to student participants, their name, gender, age, and location in China were recorded. A column denoting their autism diagnosis was not deemed necessary since such a diagnosis was essential for their participation.

Figure 1

Student Participant Information

Participant name (Student)	**Gender**	**Age**	**Location in China**
John	Male	15	Eastern China
Michael	Male	17	Eastern China
Peter	Male	16	Southern China
James	Male	17	Eastern China
Steve	Male	17	Northern China
Rory	Male	17	Eastern China
Alexander	Male	17	Southern China
Andy	Male	17	Eastern China
Liam	Male	17	Eastern China

Kate	Female	16	Western China

In regard to teacher participants, along with their name, gender, age, and location in China, their number of years as a teacher and their highest qualification were recorded. This decision to record the length of their teaching experience and their level of education was made to see if these factors can have an impact on attitudes, either positive or negative, towards students deemed to be 'different' from the norm, as is the case with autistic students.

Figure 2

Teacher Participant Information

Participant name (Teacher)	Gender	Age	Highest qualification held	Number of years teaching	Location in China
Clare	Female	39	Undergraduate Degree	18	Southern China
Bill	Male	46	Master's Degree	20	Eastern China
Nora	Female	35	Master's Degree	9	Eastern China
Louise	Female	31	Undergraduate Degree	10	Southern China
Lily	Female	25	Undergraduate Degree	3	Eastern China
Tom	Male	42	Master's Degree	14	Eastern China
Alan	Male	39	Undergraduate Degree	18	Eastern China

Helen	Female	29	Post Graduate Certificate	6	Northern China
Ella	Female	41	Undergraduate Degree	19	Eastern China
Penny	Female	37	Undergraduate Degree	14	Southern China

4.4 Ethics, Ethical Reflexivity, and Positionality

The following section will address the concepts of ethics, ethical reflexivity, and the positionality of myself as a researcher engaged in research from an educational research perspective. That is not to say that the concept of ethics, defined most simply as the standards of conduct that exist and govern various fields of study (Resnik, 2020), is only important from an educational research perspective, but that it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider the ethical standards and requirements of every extant discipline, aside from cross-disciplinary issues, from anything other than an educational research perspective.

4.4.1 Ethics

Within the realm of educational research, steps must be taken to ensure that participants are protected from harm, are considered as autonomous beings in their actions and decisions, are assured of their privacy (unless maintaining confidentiality were to cause harm), are offered some form of reciprocity as a result of their participation (no matter how brief), and are treated fairly and equitably as far as possible (British Educational Research Association, 2018; Hammersley & Traianau, 2012; Zwozdiak-Myers; 2020).

Before any research was conducted, ethical approval was sought and granted from the ethics committee at Lancaster University (see appendix 1 for a copy of this approval letter) and any and all research conducted during the course of this doctoral research was in line with the approval granted. Resultantly, teacher participants were provided with a participant information sheet (appendix 4) and a consent form (appendix 7) acknowledging their rights as a participant and their willingness to participate in the research. Student participants were also provided with an information sheet (appendix 5), as were their parents or guardians (appendix 6), and were required, along with their parents or guardians to sign a consent form that acknowledged their rights as a participant and their willingness to participate in the research (appendix 7). In keeping with good research practices, the participant information sheets were transparent, (Bryman et al., 2022; Cohen et al., 2018), as to the purposes of the research and included why an individual's participation was needed, what would be required of the participants, what actual participation would look like, what data would be collected, what would be done with participant data, what could the participant expect in return for their participation, and what rights should the participant be aware that they have. The information sheets further outlined to them what was required of me as a researcher, including the measures that would be taken to protect participant privacy and anonymity, how participant data would be stored, and the contact details for me, my doctoral supervisor, and the course leader for the Education and Social Justice course at Lancaster University, should they have any questions, queries, comments or complaints. In designing the participant information sheets and consent forms, attention was given to the growing sense that, in certain fields, information sheets and consent forms have become increasingly more complicated over recent years (Ennis & Wykes, 2016), thus impacting participant comprehension. To address this issue, participant information sheets and consent forms were written as simply as possible, whilst still including all the relevant information needed for participants to make an informed decision as to their participation. Furthermore, participants were sent both the relevant information sheet and the consent form electronically and were encouraged to take their time in deciding if they would like to participate, thus giving them the opportunity to make an informed decision about their participation in the research in their own time, and without the pressure of having to answer immediately. Participants were given a further copy of the information sheet prior to the commencement of the interview to ensure that their participation was truly informed (Nind, 2017). Participants were offered the opportunity to preview the questions that would be asked and the lines of enquiry to be investigated, with the caveat that, owing to the semi-structured nature of the interview, the exact wording of questions may change depending on circumstance, context, and participant responses. Whilst, in fact, no participants expressed a wish to see the questions in advance, and they all declined the opportunity to do so, the option was included with the well-being of the autistic participants in mind, owing to the fact that they could potentially find the unpredictability of the interview process challenging (Cridland et al., 2015).

Of particular relevance to this research were three issues that I anticipated could have the potential to cause harm to those participating in this study if not navigated correctly. The first issue was the fact that half the participants included in this study are autistic people. Owing to the nature of autism, as discussed in the literature review, and the fact that autistic participants would be described as 'vulnerable' (Cascio et al., 2020, 2021), it was important that every conceivable step be taken to ensure that they were comfortable with participating in this research, including during interviewing. The steps taken included ensuring that I was familiar with the interview procedure and the concept of the 'interview guide' so as to best support my participants (Brinkmann, 2007; Minichiello et al., 2008), that I remained patient, in possession of a relaxed and approachable demeanour and open to communication (Brinkmann, 2007), and, most importantly, that I had a good understanding of autism, how autism may display itself in the behaviour of an individual, and various strategies that can be employed to make an autistic individual feel at ease (Cocks, 2008; Krogh & Lindsey, 1999). The strategies employed took the form of clear and concise questioning, the option of multiple methods of communication, such as writing if needed or requested, taking breaks as needed or requested, and allowing participants to be interviewed in the manner that they preferred. As a result of taking these measures, many of the student participants, at the end of the interview, expressed their enjoyment of it, as best illustrated by James' comment that 'this was really fun, I enjoyed that' or Alexander's remark that he 'didn't know answering questions could be so cool. They're all about me so I know the answers!'

The second issue to be addressed arose as a result of conducting research with participants who were both autistic and teenagers. Because of the intersectionality of being both autistic and a teenager, it was essential to ensure that the students' participation and their consent to participation was something that they themselves wanted and that it was not just the wish of their parents or guardians whose consent to their child's participation was provided separately. Whilst the consent of a parent or carer is essential for a child or, in some cases, for an autistic person to be included in research, this consent should not replace or overrule the need for consent to be obtained from the child or autistic person themselves (Dockett et al., 2009). In these cases, steps should be taken, including discussion with the child or autistic person, to ensure that their consent is freely given, owing to their vulnerability to having their consent provided for them (Cocks, 2008; Mishna et al., 2004; Potter & Hepburn, 2005). Furthermore, it was important to ensure that the autistic teenagers participating in the research were not infantilised in any way whilst, at the same time, recognising that research with both young people and autistic people requires clear and concise communication, a lack of ambiguous questioning, and sensitivity to their needs as both teenagers who are still developing on an emotional, social, and cognitive level and as autistic people who require researchers to have an appreciation of the autistic experience. Only one such incident of concern arose during the timeframe in which participants were being recruited. A parent/guardian, interested in their child participating, contacted me to inquire as to what should be done if their child did not want to participate in the research but the parent/guardian wanted them to. My response to the parent/guardian was that 'whilst parental/guardian consent was essential for a child under the age of eighteen to participate in the research, no consent given by the parent/guardian can overrule the consent of the actual participant.' In order to safeguard against the possibility of there being similar incidences of which I was not aware, I spoke with each student participant at the start of their interview so as to ascertain whether or not their consent had been freely given, without coercion from a parent, guardian, or any other authority figure present in the student's life.

The third issue to be addressed was the protection from *future* harm for participants, particularly because this research was conducted with Chinese participants, living in China, regarding their views on aspects of the Chinese education system. Owing to the sanctity in which the Chinese education system is held in China, the fact that it exists as an inherently political institution, and its use as a mouthpiece through which to disseminate Chinese political ideologies (Fan, 2020; Huang et al., 2015; Xu, 2021), any criticism of, or even conversation about it is, in certain circles, seen, at best, as an unwanted conversation about the Communist Party or, at worst, as a criticism of the Communist Party. As a non-Chinese researcher asking questions rather than providing answers and with no ties to China, any risk to myself was minimal. This, however, may not have been the case for my participants. With that in mind, great effort was taken to protect the identity of all participants who took part in this research especially the identity of teacher participants who work within the political sphere of education and are often expected to 'tow the party line.' In addition to the pseudonyms assigned to each participant, direct quotations were only used in this thesis after explicit permission had been obtained from the participants in question, as has been put forward as good practice by research (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Eldh et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2015). Participants were assured that neither their recorded interview nor their full interview transcript would ever be seen by anyone other than me and themselves, should they wish to assert their right of ownership over their data collected about them. By embedding these strategies in the research, participants were adequately reassured that there would be no negative consequences as a result of their participation, as is well demonstrated by the following interaction between myself and the teacher participant, Lily, that allowed me to use my judgement of the situation to listen to her concerns, remind her that she was under no obligation to participate, and, ultimately, assuage her fears, thereby allowing the interview to continue with her consent.

(Lily) So, no one will ever know this is me right?

(JH) Yes, that's correct.

(Lily) and no one will hear this recording or see the trans...trans...cription? Is that the word?

(JH) Transcription, yes that's the word. And yes, you're right. No one will ever hear this interview apart from me and no one will ever see the whole transcription apart from me. You can see it too if you'd like to? With your permission, I might quote you in my thesis but the whole transcription won't be published.

(Lily) Okay good, that's fine...you won't say what school I work at will you?

(JH) No. Anything that could identify you won't be included. Just, as we mentioned earlier, your age, gender, highest qualification, number of years teaching, and whether you're in the east, south, west, or north of China is all that will be included.

(Lily) You could be talking about anyone.

(JH) Exactly, the data we include is often very vague and could describe millions of people in China.

(Lily) Okay, that sounds good. My principal probably would ask so many questions about what we talked if he knows it was me.

(JH) I gather that's not something you would want?

(Lily) Definitely not! I don't want trouble but it's okay. He won't know.

(JH) Okay...remember, if you would like to withdraw you are most certainly free to do so. Especially if you're worried about taking part. Would you like to see the information sheet again to think about it?

(Lily) No, no, I was just checking. I'm good, we can go.

(JH) Okay well, if you change your mind, even after the interview, you have two weeks to let me know so I can take your responses out of the thesis.

(Lily) Okay, that's good.

The existence of a two-week period following the interviews during which participants could withdraw was essential in ensuring that they were protected from future harm. It gave them time to reflect on the interview process and on how comfortable they would be with their words possibly being echoed in a doctoral thesis. Whilst it is important to note that no participants chose to withdraw after participation, the option was still granted to all participants in keeping with good, ethical practice (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

In discussing the concept of 'protection from harm', it is important to consider the needs of the reader of this thesis as well as the needs of participants and myself as researcher. Whilst the findings identified in chapter 5 are qualitatively rich, they could be, at times, distressing and potentially shocking for a reader to read. This 'trigger warning' serves to both respect and protect the reader's emotional and intellectual boundaries (Spencer & Kulbaga, 2018) whilst inviting them to read on with this consideration in mind.

On a final note, whilst participants were not offered financial reimbursement for taking part in this research, they did express a sense of satisfaction at having engaged in the research process. Steve, for example, at the conclusion of his interview, stated:

'It was like a thing where you lie on the sofa and the doctor makes you better by talking to you. Thanks for letting me do this, it was good.'

All participants were directed towards support services should they feel the need for them. The importance of this step, which may often be overlooked in qualitative research, is highlighted by Steve's comment. In discussing participants' thoughts and experiences, it is important to remember that not all of these reflections and conversations are pleasant. Some may illicit traumatic thoughts and memories and, whilst such issues did not arise in this piece of research, I viewed it as my duty to these participants to consider them not simply as data sources but as human beings whose experiences mattered, whose welfare was considered, and whose participation was a collaboration between them and me to uncover their valuable perspectives.

4.4.2 Ethical Reflexivity and Positionality

The concept of (ethical) reflexivity and researcher positionality and its importance is one that has been long discussed in qualitative research (e.g., Bourke, 2014; Chacko, 2004; Holmes, 2020; Sultana, 2007; Warin, 2011). Described at its most fundamental as a researcher's world view and the stance that is adopted by the researcher surrounding a particular piece of research and the social/political context that the research exists in as a result of said particular worldview (Foote & Bartell, 2011; Holmes, 2020; Rowe, 2014), positionality and the identification of positionality is essential in understanding how research was conducted, why it was conducted, and the results of the research conducted (Grix, 2019; Holmes, 2020; Rowe, 2014). Reflexivity is described as the ongoing process in which researchers come to know themselves in their research and are able to disclose themselves and recognise the impact that the existence of the researcher and their influence has had on research (Bryman et al., 2022; Cohen et al., 2018). Reflexivity is essential in order for a researcher to engage in the necessary process of identifying, critiquing, evaluating, reflecting on, and articulating their positionality in research.

As 'reflexivity informs positionality' (Holmes, 2020), it is vital to identify myself as a white, autistic, British, adult male, whose professional experience has been within the English education system. Recognising these aspects of my existence neither precludes me from nor establishes me as essential to uncovering the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools are able to provide autistic students with a more socially just education. They are, however, aspects of myself that have influenced this piece of research and the writing of this thesis.

As there can be little objectivity within the field of education (Dubois, 2015; Holmes, 2020), Ormston et al.'s (2014) concept of 'empathetic neutrality' comes in to play. The researcher strives to promote neutrality by recognising their own biases, by taking conscious steps to prevent them dictating the research and research process, but ultimately, by recognising that these subjective viewpoints will never fully be neutralised (Holmes, 2020). The goal here, therefore, is not to seek a purely objective research process, but to recognise that a research process will always be subjective and that it is the responsibility of the researcher to acknowledge this, whilst doing their best to ensure that research is conducted with the participant's viewpoint and experiences in mind.

In the case of this research, my position as a researcher, my 'whiteness', and my 'Britishness', historically and contemporarily viewed in China as desirable qualities (e.g., Cheng, 2019; Dikötter, 2015) undoubtedly had an impact on the power dynamics of the interviews, especially with teacher participants as is demonstrated in the first teacher interview I conducted that was with Lily:

(JH) Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today.

(Lily) I can't say no can I really?

(JH) You definitely can say no. You are under no pressure at all to take part in this interview if you don't want to or if you're not sure. That's not a problem at all.

(Lily) No, not that, it's like what people say because you're handsome, British guy, and this is a PhD.

(JH) I'm sorry, I'm not too sure what you mean.

(Lily) Like, I have to do the interview. I want to do the interview. Like not a bad thing but kinda like I can't say no to candy. Not a bad thing but it's important because it's a PhD.

(JH) Ah I see what you mean. Well, this is just a conversation really. You're the participant so it's your opinions that are the important bit. I'll ask questions and we'll have a chat based on what you say but just think about it as colleagues having a chat.

(Lily) Yeah okay. Ha yeah, I forgot you're a teacher. Okay, no problem.

As a result of this interaction with Lily, I made the conscious decision, in all future teacher interactions, to highlight the fact that, despite my position as a researcher or interviewer, and despite our inherent racial, national, or cultural differences, I was, to all intents and purposes, a fellow teacher interested in knowing my colleagues' thoughts and opinions surrounding a given topic. Presenting the interview in this light and highlighting the similarity between me and the teacher participants rather than our differences was intended to make both the concept and the reality of the interview and the participant experience of the research process in general less threatening, less formal, and more natural.

The process of dismantling the power dynamic that exists between researcher and participant was slightly more difficult when interviewing students, especially autistic students, who, given their status as a 'disabled population' often find the power dynamic between researcher and participant even more pronounced (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2019; Pickard et al., 2022; Pellicano et al., 2014). During this research, by consciously focussing on the need for 'listening, response-ability, and becoming-with' (Daelman et al., 2020), an approach to research that has been employed effectively to ensure a more equal relationship between child and researcher and disabled child and researcher (Davies, 2014; Komulainen, 2007), I was able to promote a more comfortable environment for the student participants. Moreover, as an autistic person myself, capable of imagining that the views of other autistic people, in this case children, are inherently powerful and their position recognisable (Davies, 2014; Lundy, 2007; Lundy et al., 2011), the concepts of 'listening, response-ability, and becoming-with' (Daelman et al., 2020) were put into practice during my interactions with participants, as demonstrated in a conversation experienced with Andy:

(Andy) My mom says you're autistic too. Are you?

(JH) Yes, she's right. I am autistic.

(Andy) So you know how it feels, like with the teachers or students?

(JH) I do. I remember experiencing a lot of the same experiences that you're telling me about now.

(Andy) Can you tell me?

(JH) Yes, I remember one time...

(Andy) Yeah! I get that too! So like, you're doing this research for us? For like autistic people?

(JH) I am, yes.

(Andy) So...I guess I am too? Because we're doing an interview? It's like we're working together?

(JH) I like that way of viewing it Andy. Yeah, we are working together.

(Andy) Yeah, it's not like when teachers tell you do to something or something. We're the same.

In this instance, the barrier between researcher and participant was broken down and, despite our age difference and our different roles, we were working together to uncover Andy's truth. In our shared recognition and understanding of the autistic experience, Andy was able to view his role as participant differently and we were able, through listening and through conscious response-ability, to 'become-with' each other, with me experiencing his reality, him experiencing mine, and the two of us experiencing a new shared one based on our experiences (Davies, 2014; Haraway, 2016). The sharing of a 'me too moment' (Warin, 2011), as illustrated by the conversation with Andy, was invaluable in establishing a bond and connection with some student participants, as is further shown in the following exchange with Michael:

(Michael) Why do you care about autism? Why do you want to know these things?

(JH) Well, I am autistic too and autism is something I'm very passionate about.

(Michael) Oh! Oh I didn't know. That makes me feel better. Ha okay, yeah that's awesome!

Here, Michael initially seemed hesitant to speak about his experiences, but when provided with new information about me, the view that he had of me as 'like a doctor in one of those hospitals' (Michael) changed to one that saw me as an ally. In the space of a few words, the barriers between us fell away and we were able to enter into a partnership in the quest to uncover his truth.

Although I attempted to adhere to Ormston et al.'s (2014) notion of empathetic neutrality, the reality of being an autistic person engaged in autism research made this difficult. I did not set out with the intention of disclosing my autism diagnosis to my participants. However, my membership of autism support groups, which was visible to the parents/guardians of the student participants, and the organic, naturally occurring incidences where it felt important to share my own diagnosis with some of the participants, meant that this aspect of my life was brought into the research more than I expected. Particularly challenging in this regard were the interactions with participants who were aware of their parent/guardian's desire to speak with me about autism. Kate and I, for example, shared the following interaction:

(JH) Thank you so much for speaking with me Kate. I've really enjoyed this conversation with you!

(Kate) Yeah, me too. Can you wait for a bit? I think my mom wants to ask you some things.

(JH) Of course, I'm happy to answer any questions about the research.

(Kate) No, I think it's about autism questions and what it's like being an adult and if it can go I think...things like that.

(JH) Oh, I see.

(Kate) Yeah, or she'll just find things on the internet. I'll get her.

In the conversation with Kate's parent that followed, topics were discussed such as curative measures for autism and the notion of becoming a 'successful' autistic person. The challenge here lay in balancing a number of factors: the role of the researcher, who needs to be cautious in putting forward thoughts and opinions that anyone involved in the research may, consciously or otherwise, take up as fact, the desire to correct ableist assumptions of autism that are damaging to all autistic people, the need to distance myself from the viewpoint that there exists an 'ideal' autistic experience, and the desire to protect myself, an autistic person, as illustrated in another context by my conscious decision to exclude from this thesis a transcribed version of the personal story I disclosed to Andy.

Whilst keeping this conversation with Kate's parent brief and focussed on the research, the realisation that there is sometimes a need to separate my roles as researcher and autistic person meant that whenever I was faced with a situation similar to the one described, it led to a great deal of reflection on my part as to which role takes precedence and why. It was important to position myself in the research, whilst ensuring that I did not overshadow it or change its focus.

A salient point that has been addressed throughout this thesis is the fact that I am an autistic person conducting research with autistic people or, where participants are not autistic, conducting research relating to autism education. This is an important position to highlight as I am very much aware of the experiences of being autistic and the manner in which a given education system can work against the interests of autistic people. By employing 'Cripistemology' that concerns me using my autistic experience to inform my work on autism and disability (Freeman-Loftis, 2021; Johnson & McRuer, 2014), I was able to gain a unique insight into the lives of my participants and understand on a shared autistic *intellectual* and autistic *cultural* level the processes of autocratical discourse the (specifically autistic) participants engaged in when taking part in this research. The result, as will be revealed in chapter 5, is a level of depth in participant responses and engagement (especially from autistic participants) that may otherwise have not been possible. This is due to, as referenced previously in this chapter, my ability to share autistic experiences with autistic people openly, as was the case with Kate or Andy, or even subconsciously owing to the fact that I will always know the lived autistic experience and will respond accordingly even if my own autistic identity was not brought into a given conversation with an autistic student participant. To summarise and, for want of a better phrase, I essentially understand autistic people on an autistic level. This position was invaluable in conducting research with autistic people and concerning autism education.

4.4.3 Reliability and Validity from a Phenomenological Standpoint

The concepts of reliability and validity are positivist by tradition. The belief within positivist thinking is that there is an objective truth to reality that can be uncovered through scientific measures and that can be proven, in part, by the concepts of reliability and validity which clearly establish what can and cannot be done in the pursuit of scientific truth, and how research should be conducted to ensure that the same findings are found again and again (Rose & Johnson, 2020; Nha, 2021). The concepts of reliability and validity are often rejected, however, on the basis that qualitative researchers frequently object to the scientific 'imposition' that the notions of reliability and validity attempt to establish within the domain of qualitative research (Kvale, 1996; Morse, 2018). It is important to recognise that a phenomenological consideration of the meaning of reliability or validity differs from the positivist definition. Whilst no phenomenologist would dispute the need for valid research, provided the concept of valid research was defined as research that follows methodological steps and uses methodological tools consistently and transparently in the manner stated by the researcher (Høffding et al., 2022), the idea that *reliable* research necessitates the existence of an objective truth, independent of the conceptualisation of the world within the mind, is impossible for the phenomenologist to agree with or even consider (Høffding et al., 2022; Petitmengin, 2017). With that and my own interpretative phenomenological position in mind, this thesis has employed Høffding et al.'s (2022) concepts of reliability and validity in which reliability refers to the extent to which the truth a participant shares is their truth, and validity refers to the method used to analyse the given truth expressed by a participant and the conclusions that can be drawn from that analysis.

In the conduct of this research, it was hoped that some degree of phenomenological reliability would be achieved through the recruitment of participants who could be considered social actors in the matters under investigation in this study, namely autistic students attending, and Chinese teachers employed at Chinese internationalised schools. The experiences and truths of the participants recruited were at the heart of this research. Semi-structured interviews gave them the scope and ability to verbalise their experiences and truths, allowing them to expand upon their viewpoints, and to deliver lengthy, uninterrupted thoughts, opinions, and perspectives, whilst the dialogic nature of semi-structured interviews saw their perspectives pressed in certain areas. This was only possible because the participants were reliable participants.

In essence, when a participant meets given criteria for participation (provided those criteria do not change), and that participant is interviewed in a manner that allows for the participant's truth to be uncovered, outlined, developed, and expanded upon through the researcher-participant dialogue, then 'we should trust the subject' (Jack & Roepstorff, 2003) and their experiences as reliable.

Taking all necessary steps to ensure that this research is considered valid, attention must be given to both the methodological tools used in the research and the tools used for data analysis. Semi-structured interviews have long been considered appropriate tools through which to gain a phenomenological understanding of disability (Martiny, 2015a; Martiny 2015b; Martiny & Aggerholm, 2016). They have been found to be a valid methodological tool, especially when, as is the case in this research, rich data is gathered directly from a relatively small sample size who are in the unique position of being most knowledgeable about their own perceptions and experiences (Ahlin, 2019). Thematic analysis has been chosen as the tool for data analysis in this research and will be considered in more detail in the next section of this chapter. Suffice it to say at this stage that it presents itself as a valid form of data analysis due to the substantial amount of research that has been undertaken to establish the reasons why thematic analysis is valid and the procedures to follow to ensure that its validity is continuously re-affirmed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Malterud, 2001; Thorne, 2000; Nowell et al., 2017). Taking all these matters into consideration, the research that has been conducted, and the outcomes of that research can be considered both reliable and valid from a phenomenological viewpoint.

4.5 Data Analysis

The final part of the methodology chapter seeks to complete two tasks. The first is to outline and describe the data analysis tools and strategies used in this research from both a practical viewpoint, as relates to this thesis, and from a theoretical viewpoint. The second task builds upon the first and is an attempt to explain and demonstrate how the findings of this thesis were formulated through the process of data analysis. It is important, once again, to position my own interpretative phenomenological approach at the centre of the analytical process and to emphasise my adherence to critical disability theory, because even the very data collected and included within the chosen qualitative analytical method is inherently influenced by the researcher's beliefs, values, and perspectives (Jootun et al., 2009). My own strict interpretative assumptions dictate an inductive approach to data analysis. This approach requires meaning and theme identification to spawn from the gathered data and not due to any preconceptions held on the part of the researcher or preconceived notions of what ought to be found (Gichuru, 2017). That being said, it is worth noting that general inductive methods do allow for deduction, provided the deductive viewpoint extends no further than considering the research questions and objectives when analysing the data (Thomas, 2006). Excluding data in the analysis is permissible, therefore, if its exclusion is based on its irrelevance to the research questions and objectives and provided that the steps used in the chosen method of data analysis are followed to the letter.

As a phenomenological perspective underpins the entire methodological assumption of this research, thematic analysis was considered the most appropriate form of data analysis. Thematic analysis is described as ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that, despite its apparent simplicity, is both flexible, to take into account the nature of the research and the needs of the researcher, and capable of producing rich and detailed data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Peel, 2020). As the objective of the research process in this study was to allow participants to describe their experiences in Chinese internationalised schools, thematic analysis allowed for participant descriptions to be explained through researcher reflexivity and through the identification of patterns or themes within participant responses which, when viewed with the research objectives in mind, generated a broader picture as to what phenomena had been uncovered (Guest et al., 2012; Sundler et al., 2019). The tradition of utilising thematic analysis as a data analytical method within phenomenological research is well established (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Joffe, 2011; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Its particular strength, however, especially in this research, is its ability, as best described by Ho et al. (2017), to ‘uncover and present the structure of the meaning of lived experience.’ The nature of thematic analysis allowed for comparison between the five sub-questions outlined in the introductory chapter and for themes to be identified that were relevant to those questions. Although different schools of thematic analysis exist, this thesis employs the six-stage approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2017, 2019). This remains a popular approach, owing to its rigorous framework and its recognition of the value of qualitative data to research (Peel, 2020). The six stages are as follows:

1. Familiarising oneself with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

(Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

4.5.1 Familiarising Oneself With the Data

As the data collected from the twenty participants who took part in this piece of research was in the form of audio recordings, it was essential to transcribe the data into written form in order for a thematic analysis of said data to take place (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process, which was done electronically by me, has been described by those engaged in thematic analysis as both a suitable way to ensure that one is familiarised with the data, and is an integral act of thematic analysis that goes beyond simply the mechanical process of writing heard words down verbatim, but instead allows one to generate context and meaning surrounding what is heard and transcribed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In following the guidelines established by research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2017), I was able to produce accurate transcripts of every participant interview, in which verbal and, where needed, non-verbal communication was written down as it appeared. Moreover, in listening to each recorded interview multiple times, I was able to ensure that even punctuation added in the transcribed version matched with the original audio so as to refrain from altering the meaning of the finalised transcription (Poland, 2002). Whilst participants were offered the chance to read through their final transcribed interview, no participants deemed this necessary. Whilst this step would have added an extra layer of validity to the transcribed interviews, I deemed it to be ethically unsound to force participants to read through what they had said, when such an act could be uncomfortable for them especially when they explicitly stated that they did not want to. To compensate for this omission, I listened to each audio recording multiple times, I transcribed the audio recording whilst listening to it, and I finished by re-reading the transcribed recording whilst listening to the audio recording to ensure that the transcription was a true representation of the audio recording.

4.5.2 Generating Initial Codes

Following the familiarisation of the data, aided, in part, by the transcribing of the participant audio recordings, it was essential to use that data in the generation of initial codes. The generation of initial codes is particularly important in thematic analysis as coding a piece of text gives a label to a specific idea or theme within the text whilst making analysis of the ideas or themes found within the text much easier (Gläser & Laudel, 2013;

Guest et al., 2012). In other words, coding produces smaller, more manageable units of data for analysis which in turn allows for the meaning behind the text to be better appreciated (Cohen et al., 2018; Gläser & Laudel, 2013). It is worth noting, however, that the process of coding is inherently subjective as it is left to the discretion of the analyst to best identify features of the raw data that are most interesting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To give an example of the generation of initial codes in action, one could look at Liam's response to the question I asked as to whether his school valued autistic students:

> No, I don't think so. The teachers don't really care if you are weird. They only care if you do good on the exams. But I can't talk about it to people because they don't care either. I've not been asked to do anything at school. I don't think they know if I'm at school or not. Ha, I should do that...see if they know when I'm not at school. I don't think they will (Liam).

In this case, several initial codes were generated based on Liam's response including feelings of isolation, teachers not caring, and teachers caring about academics. As coding is left to the discretion of the analyst, these codes were primarily data driven, based on what was uncovered during participant interviews. However, the existence of the research questions and research objectives directed exactly which data would be coded and which would be excluded in order to identify a comprehensive but not a complete list of features uncovered that were relevant to this investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the case of John, for example, his informing me of his favourite LEGO sets was interesting but was not coded, whilst him describing the feelings of isolation that he has at school that led to him talking about his favourite LEGO sets was. Although much research has been conducted with and surrounding the plethora of coding software that exists and is used to code data electronically (e.g., Castleberry & Nolan, 2018; Elliot-Mainwaring, 2021; Firmin et al., 2017; Oliveira et al., 2013; Williams & Moser, 2019), I chose to code my data without the use of a specific coding software. Instead, using Microsoft Word I chose to demarcate sections of text by highlighting them, before coding the relevant areas of these sections by using the 'comment' tool to name the assigned codes as necessary. Manual coding, though time consuming, has a tradition within thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2017) and was chosen as the method of coding for this research because of the cost of qualitative analysis software. In generating codes, overlap between codes was considered beneficial as, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), coding as much data as possible (time permitting) and allowing those overlaps between codes is preferable to not coding enough.

4.5.3 Searching for Themes

Stage three of thematic analysis marks the first point at which the focus of the analysis switches from identifying a broad list of codes drawn from the data in question towards sorting related categories of code together into broadly related themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2017). As has been well documented in literature employing thematic analysis (e.g., Finlay, 2021; Trainor & Bundon, 2021; Wæraas, 2022), some of these codes may emerge as dominant or main themes, others as sub-themes, and a remaining group of codes may be discarded. The end point of this stage is a broad collection of potential main and sub-themes and the sense that some specific themes are beginning to emerge as particularly important. In the case of this research, thematic tables were used to plot initial themes and sub-themes (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Thematic tables highlighting the initial themes and sub-themes. The letters 'S' and 'T' denote the existence of a sub-theme that stemmed from students (S), from teachers (T), or from both students and teachers (ST).

Theme: Feelings of isolation	**Theme: Lack of agency**	**Theme: Lack of voice**
Sub themes:	Sub themes:	Sub themes:
1.Few/no friends ST	1.Unable to make decisions ^{S}	1.Inability to advocate ^{S}
2.Trying to fit in ^{S}	2.Incapable of making decisions ^{T}	2.No room for alternate voices ST
3.Not trying hard enough ^{T}	3.No alternatives ST	3.No desire for alternate voices ^{T}
4.Expected due to differences ST	4.Feelings of powerlessness ^{T}	
5.Deserving of isolation ^{T}		

Theme: School and preparation	**Theme: Feelings of value**	**Theme: Feelings of support**
Sub themes:	Sub themes:	Sub themes:
1.Not ready for what comes next ST	1.Not considered important ^{S}	1.Lack of support from teachers ^{S}
2.Excitement to leave ^{S}	2.Less value than neurotypicals ^{T}	2.Who to support and perceived equity ^{T}
3.Concerns about the future ^{S}	3.Negative feelings of self-value ^{S}	3.Support as earned ^{T}
4.Low chance of work ST		
5.Feelings of hopelessness ^{S}		
6.Ready for higher education ^{S}		

The themes and sub-themes generated were mostly descriptive in that they arose due to patterns identified in the data that were relevant to the research questions and purpose (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Whilst there could be an overlap between various themes or sub-themes, this is to be expected due to the subjective nature of organising coded data into themes and sub-themes and is considered perfectly acceptable due to the further stages of refinement that need to be conducted in the six-stage process (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Furthermore, it is important to recognise that this thematic table was one that was deemed satisfactory, rather than perfect, owing to the importance, as stated by Braun and Clarke (2006), to 'not get over-enthusiastic with endless re-coding.' That being said, a good sense of relevant themes and sub-themes had been established by this point.

4.5.4 Reviewing Themes

Stage four of the six-stage process of thematic analysis is concerned with the refinement of the candidate themes and sub-themes identified in step three of the process. During this stage, it has been highlighted that various possible candidate themes are not themes at all, whilst other candidate themes, whilst important, are not significant enough or are too inter-related to other candidate themes to exist in their own right (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2017). The process of reviewing themes is a two-step process involving, in the first instance, a review of all the coded extracts that combine together to create a given theme to ensure they form a coherent pattern, after which the analyst needs to make certain of the validity of their themes and that they accurately reflect the meanings located within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Whilst this can appear a complex process, it has been suggested that answering various questions related to one's initial thematic map or table can be beneficial. Maguire and Delahunt (2017), for example suggest answering the following questions to assist in the review process:

- Do the themes make sense?
- Does the data support the themes?
- Am I trying to fit too much into a theme?
- If themes overlap, are they really separate themes?
- Are there themes within themes (subthemes)?
- Are there other themes within the data?

(Maguire & Delahunt, 2017)

In adhering to the theme review process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2017, 2019) and in keeping with the guidance provided by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), a refined thematic table was generated (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Thematic table showing reviewed themes and sub-themes.

Theme: Feelings of value	**Theme: Lack of Engagement**	**Theme: School and preparation**
Sub theme: Value as an individual	Sub theme: Lack of agency	1.Not ready for what comes next ST
1.Not considered important ^{S}	1.Unable to make decisions ^{S}	2.Excitement to leave ^{S}
2.Less value than neurotypicals ^{T}	2.Incapable of making decisions ^{T}	3.Concerns about the future ^{S}
3.Negative feelings of self-worth ^{S}	3.No alternatives ST	4.Low chance of work ST
	4.Feelings of powerlessness ^{T}	5.Feelings of hopelessness ^{S}

Sub theme: isolation from devaluation 1.Few/no friends ST 2.Trying to fit in ^{S} 3.Not trying hard enough ^{T} 4.Expected due to differences ST 5.Deserving of isolation ^{T}	Sub theme: Lack of voice 1.Inability to advocate ^{S} 2.No room for alternate voices ST 3.No desire for alternate voices ^{T} Sub theme: Lack of support 1.Lack of support from teachers ^{S} 2.Who to support and perceived equity ^{T} 3.Support as earned ^{T}	

Of note in this refined thematic table is the collapsing of various separate themes into other pre-existing themes and their re-emergence as sub-themes rather than as themes in their own right. For example, when looking at the coded data, it became apparent that the feelings of isolation experienced by student participants stemmed from the fact that they were deemed less valuable by their peers and teachers and so were shunned by them. Likewise, the notion that autistic people are deserving of isolation, which was a theme that was found to be running throughout teacher participant responses, only existed because of the lack of value that autistic people have in the eyes of these teachers. Similarly, the interconnected relationship between the concepts of agency and voice (Conner et al., 2022), meant that it was more appropriate to collapse these themes together to create an overarching theme of a lack of engagement, to which both a lack of a voice and a lack of agency contribute. Whilst the process of reviewing the initial data codes and the themes to which they had been allocated was time consuming, it was essential in ensuring the validity of the themes generated and contributed to the reflective nature of thematic analysis that encourages continuous review (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.5.5 Defining and Naming Themes & Producing the Report

The final stage of the process focusses on the themes generated and is concerned with the need, as best described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.92), to 'identify the essence of what each theme is about.' This consists of being certain of the capabilities of one's themes and ensuring that they do neither too little nor too much. Furthermore, it is essential to include a narrative as to why each theme is important, how each theme is connected to the overall account that the research is reporting and how these various themes relate to each other (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). In the case of this research, presenting a narrative for each theme and discussing their relationship with each other will be a running process that takes place within the 'findings' chapter that directly follows this. Likewise, the sixth stage of the process, producing the report, relates to the narrative process involved in defining and naming themes and will be a running process, starting within the 'findings' chapter. The purpose of this step is, in the words of Braun and Clarke, to 'tell the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis.' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). This thesis will now focus its attention towards these areas by firstly presenting the findings of this research and, subsequently, by discussing them as they relate to extant literature and understanding.

Chapter 5: Findings

The themes uncovered during the process of thematic analysis constitute the findings of this thesis. Whilst there was a subjective element to defining and categorizing the data into these themes, they represent what was discussed and revealed during the course of the participant interviews and the subsequent data analysis. This chapter will discuss the findings under the headings of each of the identified themes, namely 'feelings of value', 'lack of engagement', and 'school and preparation'. When discussing each theme or finding, the sub-themes or sub-findings that were highlighted in chapter 4 will be drawn upon to add further depth to what was uncovered. This demarcated process results in a more comprehensive understanding of the findings of this thesis and goes a significant way towards ensuring the presence of a narrative which is a key element of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

The findings in this thesis exist mostly as extracts from my interviews with participants and the subsequent analysis of those extracts. This format was chosen for a number of reasons. First, participant responses themselves, as will become apparent during the reading of this findings chapter, provide suitable answers to the research sub-questions outlined in the introduction. Second, this research marks the first of its kind to include the voices of autistic participants within China. Including those voices as much as possible was deemed to be extremely valuable and especially so from a CDT lens as previously discussed in chapter 3. Third, by reducing participant extracts, one could suggest that I had been selective in the quotes that I used. By drawing on greater numbers of these participant extracts, it is hopefully apparent that this was not the case and that such an action instead highlights that participants were, for the most part, unified in agreement with their inter-group cohort who made up a given demographic (either autistic student participants or teacher participants).

5.1 Findings: Feelings of Value

From the theme of feelings of value, two sub-themes emerged. The sub-themes, entitled ‘value as an individual’ and ‘isolation from devaluation’ were generated from coding the participant responses given during the interview process. Figure 5 below offers a clearer picture as to what these coded responses are.

Figure 5

Coded responses from the theme of ‘Feelings of Value’ and the corresponding sub-themes

Theme: Feelings of Value					
Sub-theme: Value as an individual			**Sub-theme: Isolation from devaluation**		
Student responses	**Teacher responses**	**Student and Teacher responses**	**Student responses**	**Teacher responses**	**Student and Teacher responses**

Not considered important by teachers	Less value than ‘neurotypical’ students		Attempting to ‘fit in’	Not trying hard enough to ‘fit in’	Few/no friends
Negative feelings related to self-worth				Deserving of isolation	Expected isolation due to differences

5.1.1: Value as An Individual

An important sub-theme to arise during participant interviews was the concept of autistic students and of autistic people in general having ‘value’ in the light of their diagnosis of autism. All students interviewed reported that they did not believe themselves to be considered important by their teachers and, as a result, experienced negative feelings of self-worth. All teachers confirmed the validity of this student belief as it became apparent through their interviews that they considered autistic students to be of less value than their neurotypical counterparts as a result of their diagnosis. One explanation for this attitude was given as ‘they’re just not the same as the other students…they do less, think less, achieve less. I don’t know what they can do.’ (Tom). In another instance, teacher devaluation of autistic students in comparison with neurotypical students came from fear of what autism is and what autistic students represent.

> I don’t think they should be in the classroom. They aren’t the same as normal children and they don’t do everything in the same way. They can be scary. A bit like a robot. Like they are not really a person. They need help all the time or they just stare. They are not even the worst though. They have autism but they are better than other children. But if they are in the classroom, other, more worse, children will also come to class. So I think it is good if only normal children come to class. Normal children are what we should have in school and in the country. (Penny)

In this case, it is important to recognise that, whilst Penny’s response made reference to stereotypical descriptions of autistic behaviour in a negative way, her main fear was the possibility that other ‘more worse’ disabled students would be permitted to attend internationalised schools as a result of the continued inclusion of autistic students. This was a fear shared by Bill who remarked:

> They (autistic students) are the not normal children that we have in school now. I don’t want them here because…well…they can be bad. They can take time away from normal children. But, they are not the most bad. But if they come to school, more bad children will come like children with more mental problems. If that happens there will be no time to teach the normal children. We will have autistic children, then children with other things, then children who have the hardest diseases. It is scary because we can’t teach the normal children. (Bill)

As with Penny’s response, Bill espouses views that devalue autistic students by referring to them as inherently ‘bad’ as a result of their autism diagnosis. However, the teachers’ devaluation of autistic students compared with neurotypical students is part of a wider attitude that devalues disabled students in general. Participant focus was centred around autism due to the nature of my questions, but it could be the case that the devaluation of autistic students stems from the fact that they fall into the wider category of ‘disabled students’ rather than it being evidence of a very specific ‘anti-autism’ rhetoric. However, whilst the concept of a fear of disability in general was one that hung over every teacher interview, the majority of participants only made specific reference to autistic students. For Louise and Nora for example, autistic students were valued less than neurotypical students because they were seen as being unable to contribute meaningfully to society once their education was complete.

> They might finish school and go to study in college but not in China. They won’t pass the exams in other schools. Only here because they pay. But they can’t help the country grow more. They just need help they can’t give help. The normal classmates are more important because they will give the help and help the country. (Louise)

> Well…I don’t think they (autistic students) need to be here (at the internationalised school). They are not the children I want to teach. I don’t know how to teach them. They can’t learn properly. I’m teaching the normal children. If disabled children come they will sit at the back and they can listen or draw pictures but I won’t stop teaching normal children. I get paid to teach normal children. The other children (autistic students) won’t do anything after they leave anyway. (Nora)

For both Louise and Nora and, indeed, for other teacher participants who made comments such as ‘autistic children won’t help China’ (Alan) or ‘they (autistic students) will not appreciate the education. We will spend lots of money but they won’t help China’ (Helen), the devaluation of autistic students over neurotypical students came from their belief that autistic people would serve as a burden to society rather than as an asset, and that they would not put their education to use serving the nation. In one conversation with Ella, a teacher with 19 years of experience, the direction of the conversation gave me the opportunity to investigate her view that autistic students are unable to contribute to society.

Ella: I don’t think autistic children can do much with going to school. They won’t get jobs, they won’t be the president…haha…, they won’t think like normal people. You think they can don’t you? That is why you ask me.

JH: I think that there have been lots of successful autistic people who think their education is important.

Ella: Who? Who is that?

JH: Well…erm…ah, Elon Musk…he is autistic and he is very successful.

Ella: But he is from USA. Who has been autistic and for China?

JH: I’m not too sure sorry. But he has been successful.

Ella: Yes, but he could be more if he was normal. He could help his country more if he was normal. Being normal would be better.

JH: So, what if an autistic person had an education and then stayed working in China? Would that be better or worse than a non-autistic person who went to school in China but then left China?

Ella: The normal person who is Chinese would be good. They went to good schools in China and they leave China and show what China can do. The autism person will not be as good because they are not normal. They can be good like *Măsīkè* (the Mandarin term for Musk) but not as good as a normal person.

Interestingly, Ella’s justification for devaluing autistic students compared with neurotypical students was that autistic students cannot contribute as much to a given society as a non-autistic person. However, when presented with a situation in which the non-autistic person had left the society they were contributing to, Ella still viewed that individual as more valuable to the society they had left behind than the educated autistic individual who remained. It is reasonable to hypothesise that a neurotypical individual who was educated in China and remained in China would be deemed more valuable to Chinese society than an individual who was educated in China but then left. Ella's statement that this would not be the case in the hypothetical situation under discussion stems directly from the fact that the individual remaining in China was autistic. Such a stance suggests that, in reality, teacher belief that neurotypical students have more value than autistic students is not based on the perceived strengths of neurotypical students compared with autistic students, but is instead based on the ingrained assumption that autistic students are less valuable because of the fact that they are autistic.

As previously mentioned, autistic student participants were aware of their standing in the eyes of their teachers and reported that the teachers considered them to be less important and less valuable than their neurotypical counterparts.

> Yeah…my teachers don't think I'm important. They even say that I'm not. I get good grades but that doesn't matter. They don't think I can do anything or that I will have a job. I want to go to Canada and my English is better than the teacher, but they say that I'm not important. They know I have autism and they think I don't matter because of that. (Michael)
>
> The teachers don't care about students like us…we can be the best with the best scores and the best assignments but that doesn't mean that they think we are the best. They think we are the worst because of autism. They hear autism and then we should sit at the back and be quiet. In every class it is the same. (James)

Both Michael and James placed considerable emphasis on their academic performance as justification for their belief that they ought to be considered important by their teachers whilst simultaneously asserting that the stigma that surrounds autism is the reason that they are not considered important. In other interviews, Rory explicitly stated that 'my teacher told me that she doesn't give me grades because of autism' whilst Kate was told by her mother from her teacher that 'I'm at the bottom of the class and I don't get a grade because my teacher has the doctor letter that I have autism.' It is unsurprising that autistic student participants felt that they were not considered important by their teachers given that the interviews suggest that the teachers quite openly devalue their autistic students. That being said, a number of autistic student participants stated that they have been refusing to let their teachers view them as unimportant by means of achieving success through their academic performance.

> I won't let them think I am not the best. I am the best and I only get good grades. They (the teachers) don't like me very much but they have to see I am the best. I study every night because if I do bad they will say that I am autistic so I won't do well. (Alexander)

> I get 100% in everything. If Amelia (this is a pseudonym for a neurotypical student who was mentioned) gets 80% then she does well but if I do (get 80%) my teacher says that I'm not good. If I get 80% the teacher says maybe this school is not my school. We are near a disabled school so teacher says I could go there. I have to get 100% or 95% and then I do okay. (John)

These statements from the student participants acknowledged that they are not considered important and are judged by different criteria from their neurotypical counterparts. Michael, James, Alexander, and John all emphasised their own academic performance, expressed their belief that they should be valued more highly as a result of their academic performance, and highlighted the fact that they are required to overperform in order to receive teacher approval. Kate, on the other hand, took a different approach. As a result of her belief that as an autistic student she is considered less important than her neurotypical peers, she reported that she had stopped trying to achieve academically.

> Well I don't get grades because of autism so why should I do well? I don't try. I just sit at the back and I think a lot and I think about my cat and I think about stroking my cat. But my teachers don't care so I don't care I'm not important like my classmates. It was bad but now I don't mind. They leave me alone and I can just think. (Kate)

Kate was not alone in demonstrating this attitude, with Rory expanding on his previous statement regarding his teachers not giving him grades as a result of him being autistic.

> They don’t want me in the class and I don’t want to be there. I don’t do anything and they don’t ask me to. I wanted to be a good student but when they (teachers) say that I am autistic so they won’t care about me, why should I be a good student? My mom is angry with me sometimes but if I am a good student I still get bad grades. (Rory)

Regardless of whether or not autistic student participants responded to their teacher attitudes towards them by ensuring that they were academically high performing or by ‘trying less’ in school, all student participants believed and gave anecdotal evidence that they were not considered important by their teachers, were considered less important or were held to a higher standard than their neurotypical classmates, and were only considered important when they were academically high achieving. In the case of those who believed themselves to be considered important by their teachers only when they were academically high achieving, the standard to which they were held was described as being so high as to be unrealistic and very difficult to reach in reality.

As a result of not being considered important by their teachers, autistic student participants reported negative feelings related to their own self-worth, further highlighting the devaluation of autistic students in Chinese internationalised schools. All ten autistic student participants in this research stated that they viewed themselves as less valuable and less important than their neurotypical classmates as a result of the way that their teachers treated them.

> I think they say it so much so I have started to believe them…maybe I am not as good as my classmates…maybe I am not important. They say it so much at class and in school and to my parents and to me that I think that they are right. I tell me that they are not but I think they maybe are. (Liam)

> Yeah I believe my teachers when they say it. They are the teacher and I am probably not important. I have autism and that says I am not important in school. If I was important like my classmates I wouldn’t have autism. They told me that autism was what makes me not that good so I have it so I must not be that good. (Peter)

> They are right. They say it so much so they are right. I just think about my cat and that is not a thing important people do. I can’t be good for China when I think about

> my cat and that is what I do because that is what they let me do so they are right. I am not important. (Kate)

The influence of teachers on participant self-image is clearly important. The repetition and re-enforcement of negative perceptions of autism by teachers has led participants to de-value their own self-worth and consider themselves unimportant as ‘that is what the teachers always say’ (Rory). In the case of Peter, not only do his negative feelings of self-worth stem from what his teachers say about him, but they have extended to the concept of autism and of being autistic. Autism is often viewed by autistic people as a part of themselves and has now in itself become an additional cause of Peter’s negative feelings of self-worth. The internalization of autism as something negative in and of itself was an experience shared by other participants whose negative interactions with teachers had led them to view themselves as the problem, rather than the problem lying with those with prejudiced views.

> I don’t like myself much because my teacher always thinks I’m stupid. They used to say it a lot and I used to think they are stupid but now maybe they are right. I think autism is what makes me stupid because they say it a lot (Steve).
>
> I have to keep doing well so I beat autism. My teachers say it and I think they don’t have a problem with me but with autism and me. I have to do well because they say bad things if I don’t. I think without autism I would be so good but the teachers say autism is bad and so I think it is. They don’t like me because of autism and I don’t like autism because I am the best and without really the best! (Alexander)

Such negative feelings of self-worth are particularly insidious as they endure without external reinforcement, becoming internalised perceptions of self. Interestingly, the student participants who had ‘given up trying’ reported negative feelings of self-worth that stemmed solely from teacher attitudes towards them. It was the student participants who had strived to achieve academically in order to be seen as valuable in the eyes of their teachers who had internalised the teacher devaluation of autism and viewed themselves as less than because of their autism diagnosis. This finding was verbalised succinctly by Alexander who recognised that he had internalised the belief that autism equates to being less than.

> I think I think like this because the teacher says it so much. But not just that she says it so much. Also because I am the best but actually I'm still not the best. I get the best grades but grades don't make me the best but I should be. If I didn't have autism I would be the best. It is autism that makes me not the best. If autism didn't matter my teacher would say I am the best because I am. But I am not the best with autism. (Alexander)

Alexander's comments highlight the sense of injustice that he feels at being the (self-reported) most academically gifted student in his class but not the recipient of his teacher's recognition and praise. Alexander has taken his teacher's refusal to acknowledge his achievements, coupled with their remarks about autism to mean that the 'autistic part' of Alexander is a negative aspect of his being that is holding him back from his true potential. The concept of autism as a barrier to success was a sentiment shared by a number of other participants who reported that 'I could be so much more and better without autism' (Rory) or that 'autism is what makes me fail…it will always be there so I will always fail' (Peter). Furthermore, both Rory and Peter revealed that this negative attitude towards their 'autistic self' ultimately stemmed from their respective teachers.

> My teacher said it so much so now I know they are right. I could be much better if I didn't have autism but I do so I guess it's okay. Well, maybe it's not okay. I don't know…I don't think I'm very good at anything. (Rory)

> Yeah my teacher says it a lot and they are a teacher so they are right. They must be right. I fail because of it (autism). My grades are okay but I have to be better than okay because of it (autism). When they are just okay I fail like my teachers say. (Peter)

In every conversation with participants, be they teachers or students, it was apparent that autistic students were not considered valuable as individuals. In all cases however, the devaluation of autistic students stemmed from teacher attitudes and beliefs in relation to the concept of autism, autistic people and students, and the wider concept of disability as a whole. These attitudes, openly displayed by teachers, led the autistic student participants to believe that they were not considered important by their teachers which, in turn, resulted in them all reporting negative feelings of self-worth. These feelings were sometimes 'surface level' feelings that had arisen because of what a teacher or teachers had said to a given student in the past. Where this was the case, students often reported that they had stopped trying in class in an attempt to protect themselves from further harm from their teacher. Other students, through their desire to prove their teacher wrong, had internalised these negative feelings of self-worth which seemed to stem from a disconnect between actual attainment and the praise that student participants believed should be garnered as a result, and the realization that simply being autistic is enough to ensure that the deserved recognition from teachers would never be given. The lack of value given to and felt by the autistic participants has far reaching impacts and consequences, including feelings of isolation that stem from devaluation.

5.1.2 Isolation from Devaluation

The second sub-theme to emerge from the theme of feelings of value was that of isolation stemming from the devaluation of autistic students. All autistic student participants reported that, despite trying to 'fit in' with their neurotypical peers, they found themselves excluded by them, causing them to feel devalued by their peers and suffering isolation as a result of their exclusion.

> I try to fit in and do what my classmates do but I just do things differently…They have those conversations where I don't always know what's happening in them. The conversations where it's like a joke but they all know it but you don't and then it's like you are the joke. I don't think I am the same as my classmates. I don't have friends and they don't want me to be their friend. It makes me sad and I don't feel like I am very good. (Peter)

> I would try and be friends with everyone but it was so hard. I could never do stuff the same way. I did have some friends but they got older and didn't want to be my friends anymore. I don't know what I did wrong or how to fix it but I did try. I feel sad sometimes and lonely because I don't have anyone and they don't want me to play with them. (John)

> Yeah, I have some friends…well, I did have some friends…maybe not because I don't feel good when I'm around them. They don't play with me and we don't eat food together. They like singing but I like my cat and I talk about my cat a lot so maybe they don't like me. Huh…I think it's hard to have friends and I feel sad.

> They don’t like me, and they don’t want me to play with them. It’s just me and my cat. (Kate)

In these extracts from autistic student participant interviews, each of the students described their unhappiness at not being included despite making efforts to establish and maintain friendships and to ‘fit in’ with their peers. It also became apparent that the isolation they experienced as a result of their exclusion was not self-imposed or desired, but was a direct consequence of the negative attitudes of their neurotypical peers towards them.

> I like talking to people and I like being around people, but my classmates say that I’m not good. They don’t want to be my friend. They don’t think I’m good at anything or that I’m a person, so I don’t have anyone to talk to anymore. I just do everything on my own. (Alexander)

> I think they listen to what the teachers say so now they don’t want to be my friend because they think I’m not good like what the teachers say. I want friends but they listen to the teachers, and they also think I’m not good, so I don’t have friends. My classmates won’t be my friends. Sometimes I don’t talk for lots of days at school. (Steve)

Particularly surprising was the testament of Steve who not only faced devaluation and isolation from his peers but who believed that their treatment of him was influenced by their interactions with teachers. This was not the only example of perceived teacher influence on peer attitudes, however, with Andy stating that ‘I try to be the same as my classmates, but my teacher has told them I’m not’, and Rory making reference to teachers who ‘stop me from being the same as the other children because they don’t let me…they tell them I’m not the same.’ In each of these instances, the attempts by the students to fit in with their classmates are thwarted by their teachers having already informed their peers that they are not the same. Further discussion with these participants revealed that after the interventions by their teachers, and despite their continued efforts to ‘fit in’, the sense of devaluation by their peers and the ensuing isolation had already been established.

JH: How does it make you feel that your teacher told your classmates that you’re not the same?

Andy: It's lots of teachers. They told my classmates, and it makes me sad and sometimes angry.

JH: Could you tell me a little bit about feeling sad and angry?

Andy: Well, I try to fit in and I keep trying to be the same as them all. If it's just me sometimes I can pretend that I'm the same and sometimes they maybe like me because I can pretend well so they think I'm the same. When the teacher tells them, I can't pretend. They all know I'm different and that different is not good.

JH: I can understand why that would make you sad and angry.

Andy: Yes and they made everything bad because they told my classmates. I try to be the same but now it doesn't matter. They will always think I'm different. I don't have friends because they don't like me because I'm different because the teachers told them. I think the teachers made me have no friends.

JH: Can you tell me a little more about the teachers 'not letting you'?

Rory: Yeah well, they didn't help me fit in. They were the people who said I won't get the chance to fit in. They could not have said anything but they wanted me to have no friends.

JH: I can imagine that must be very frustrating.

Rory: They are the teachers so yes…They should be nice to us but they make it so no one like me. They made me have no friends and it's because of them not me. I try to fit in but they don't want me to so now it's just me and I eat lunch alone.

What is also clear from these particular interview excerpts is that the student participants attributed blame to their teachers and felt feelings of anger, frustration, and sadness that they had not been afforded the opportunity to attempt to 'fit in' on their own terms before their diagnosis of autism or their differences were revealed to their classmates. As a result of teacher intervention, they were labelled by their peers as not valuable, leading to the feelings of isolation and devaluation already described. Whilst it may be puzzling as to why teachers would seemingly 'sabotage' the potential for some of their students to make meaningful connections, teacher responses to interview questions revealed why this might be the case.

All teacher participants interviewed reported that they did not believe that autistic students, real or hypothetical, made ‘it really clear that they want to be friends and can be normal.’ (Clare). Instead, they believed that autistic students ‘do not try to be normal even when they can be. They don’t try to be like others enough’ (Penny). Put simply, teacher participants believed that autistic students did not try hard enough to ‘fit in’. This attitude was epitomised by the following conversation with Louise.

JH: You say that ‘they don’t try to be like others enough’ what does that mean?

Louise: They are different and little strange but they can be normal if they want to be but they don’t want to be they want to be different so why will their classmates want to be their friends? I tell their classmates that they have autism but that they can try to be normal if they want.

JH: What have the classmates said to you telling them this?

Louise: They tell me when *names a student diagnosed with autism* is not being normal and I tell them that they shouldn’t play with *the student previously mentioned* if they are not being normal. They can leave them alone and play well and work well with each other who can be normal.

JH: I see, how do you think *names the student diagnosed with autism* would feel in these situations? Have they ever spoken to you about it?

Louise: Yes, they don’t feel so good but it is their problem. They can be normal if they try but often they don’t try so I don’t feel so bad for them. When they do well I feel good because they know what to do but when they are being strange, they need to improve.

Whilst this attitude on the part of the teachers may seem unusual, especially when taking into account the well-documented social difficulties experienced by autistic people, other conversations with teacher participants revealed that the belief that autistic people are simply not trying hard enough to ‘fit in’ has developed as a result of teachers conflating autism, intelligence, and academic ability. Lily stated that:

> They are autistic but they can talk, they know what we are doing in class, they can come to school and they do not do things that disabled children do. They are different but they can be smart. Maybe less smart but still a little smart. So then,

> they are not trying hard enough because they can do the other things and this bit is easy. They just don't want to (Lily)

Whilst Alan further backed up this belief with their opinion that:

> I think they just don't want to be the same as their classmates. They are in a normal school with normal children so they must be normal enough so they can do things that everyone else can do. They say they can't, but they can because they wouldn't go here if they could not. They want to be special, and they don't fit in because they think they are better maybe. If they can sit in class and do class work, then they can be normal with their classmates. They just don't want to. (Alan)

These responses suggest a belief on the part of the teachers that when academic difficulties are not present, autism should have no impact on the life of the individual with the diagnosis. When co-morbidities present themselves, the social difficulties and differences faced by autistic people are much more widely accepted as being 'a real thing when they can't go to school or talk or think very well' (Lily). Interestingly, however, when discussing whether autistic students try hard enough to 'fit in', teacher participants, who had previously referred to autistic students as not belonging in mainstream education due to their academic difficulties, made no mention of such difficulties. Indeed they appeared to consider the autistic students perfectly capable of engaging academically, in total contradiction to what they had said earlier. Although it is an issue that will be dealt with later in this chapter, it is worth noting here that the teachers re-iterated the view that autistic students did not belong in mainstream education when discussing the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools prepare autistic students for life beyond school. There are many examples to be found in medical literature where reference is made to autistic people, particularly those without accompanying intellectual disabilities or linguistic delays, appearing aloof or uninterested in their peers. It could be argued, therefore, that teacher participant references to autistic students not trying hard enough to 'fit in' or, as mentioned by Alan, thinking that they are special, was a recognition of the nature of autism itself. That being said, regardless of whether or not teacher participants were aware that autistic people can present as aloof, the prevalent attitude of the teachers towards autistic students was that they are deserving of the social isolation that they frequently experience, as demonstrated by Tom's response below.

> They deserve to be on their own because they just don’t try to be friends with anyone. I don’t feel bad for them but they probably feel bad for them. They only care about themself and so they deserve to not have friends. The other students are trying to be nice but the student with autism is not nice. (Tom)

Hand in hand with the issue of whether or not autistic students tried hard enough to fit in was the issue of whether or not they had friends. The autistic student participants reported that they had few or no friends, a view that was echoed by the teacher participants.

> It is their fault but they must feel alone. Sometimes I wish they could be more normal and like their classmates so they could not be on their own. But then they are the children who make problems so it is their problem. I feel less bad when I remember that but they must still feel alone and not very important. (Nora)

> They should feel bad because they don’t have friends and they must not like to not talk to anybody. But they just need to try hard like I said. They are the people who are alone so they must fix that and be better at talking and playing and working with their classmates. (Helen)

> Well, I think yes they are lonely. It’s difficult to help them because they can be so difficult to be friends with. When I think maybe they will be friends, the autism child does a silly thing and then they are not friends so the children feel bad. The other children have more friends to play with after but the autism child doesn’t so they have to be alone and sometimes they look sad. (Ella)

Although not necessarily sympathetic to, or even aware of, the difficulties with social interaction that autistic people often face, these views do at least recognise the isolation and devaluation that flow from the absence of friends, whether that be self-imposed, as the teachers believed, or otherwise. Autistic student participants corroborated the teacher perceptions that having few or no friends further exacerbated the feelings of isolation and devaluation that they had already reported.

> Yeah, I don’t have any friends. They don’t want to be my friend or play with me or work with me or anything. It’s what I said, the teachers have made it like that but I think also I am different and it’s hard to not be different, so I don’t have any friends.

> I don’t feel very good about that. I’m not important to them and I feel lonely. (Andy)

> I want friends but it’s so difficult. They don’t want to talk to me and I feel really bad about that. It’s like nobody cares about me and I’m quite lonely because of that. I don’t think I’ll have many friends in my life but I just want some. If I have some, I’ll feel better but maybe I won’t have any. (James)

> I would like to have some friends. Maybe I would feel better if I had friends and I would feel like I could make people happy or that I could do something important. But I don’t have friends, so I feel sad, and I don’t think I matter much. I don’t want to be the most important but maybe a little important to my friends. But right now, I don’t have friends, so I guess I feel sad. (Liam)

Although all participants agreed that autistic students had few or no friends and that having few or no friends would lead to feelings of isolation and devaluation, autistic student responses and teacher responses differed as to the reasons for the lack of friendship. Whilst teacher participants placed the blame on autistic students and their desire to be different or their inability to get along with their classmates, autistic student participants recognised that they were different from their neurotypical classmates but, in many cases, were unable to identify why they had few or no friendships. From a teacher participant perspective, the reasons for having few or no friendships and the ensuing devaluation and isolation were clear to see. They were not so obvious, however, from the point of view of the autistic student participants who, despite what the teacher participants said, seemed to value the idea of friendships, being valued by friends, and fitting in with their classmates who had the potential to become friends.

The final coded response given by both teachers and students which related to the sub-theme of isolation from devaluation, was the concept of expected isolation due to the inherent differences between autistic and neurotypical people. Given the student responses relating to their desire, but inability, to ‘fit in’ with their neurotypical peers, the view taken by the teachers that the autistic students did not try hard enough to ‘fit in’ and were, therefore, deserving of isolation, and the belief by both demographics that autistic students would have few or no friends, it is unsurprising that there was an expectation of isolation on the part of all participants. Autistic student participants reported that they ‘know that they are going to be alone' (Kate), whilst teacher participants were more likely to be surprised if an autistic student was not isolated rather than the contrary.

> I don't think that I will have any friends. I am used to not having any friends and I am too different from my classmates so I think that it will be really hard for me to have friends. My teachers say I won't have friends and my classmates say it too so it is what I think will happen. I am sad about it but I can't change it. (John)
>
> No, I don't expect to have friends…I would be really surprised to have friends but I'm going to be lonely I know it. I'm too different from my classmates and my teachers and everyone. And they know that I'm different so I don't think I will have anyone. It's a bit sad because no one cares, and I don't have friends or people to talk to but it's not as sad because I know that it is going to happen. (Michael)
>
> Yeah, I think I always think that I will be on my own. I know that I won't have anyone to talk to because I'm too different. I'm not the same so I think I think it's normal to not have some friends or things like that. I feel like people don't care about me, but I do now think that it's normal to not have friends if you're different like me. (Alexander)
>
> I think it would be very surprising if they had friends or if they did not feel alone! They are so different so no, I don't think they would have friends. Yeah they are definitely going to be alone. They are too strange and different. They are always sitting alone, and I'm not surprised. (Alan)
>
> I think they must be very lonely because they are different from the other kids. They don't play or work well with the other kids. It is their responsibility but I think they must still be lonely. If someone has done something bad, they still feel sad about going to prison, so it is like that. They have done the bad things to make them lonely, but they still feel sad because of it I think. It would be strange if they didn't feel lonely. (Ella)

As has been the case with all previous lines of enquiry and participant responses, teacher and autistic student participants all agreed that there was an expectation that autistic students would feel isolated due to their differences. What differs however is the attitude and sentiment of the two distinct groups towards the phenomena. Autistic student participants appear to want to establish a connection with their peers but have grown despondent with the way they are ostracised due to their differences. Teacher participants on the other hand, continue to lay the blame at the door of the autistic students and, despite recognizing that they are isolated because of their differences, continue to insist that 'autistic kids need to learn how to fit in more. They won't be lonely if they do that' (Tom). It is clear from the analysis of participant responses that autistic students do not feel valued in their internationalised schools, whilst the potential teachers of such students do not value autistic students.

5.2 Findings: Lack of Engagement

From a critical disability perspective, the theme of 'lack of engagement' relates most closely to the concept of disabled people not being afforded control over their own lives in a given aspect of society. In this case, the sub-themes identified were 'lack of agency', 'lack of voice', and 'lack of support'. These sub-themes directly relate to the degree of ownership which the autistic students have over their education within the education system in which they are enrolled. Again, the sub-themes were generated by coding participant responses given during the interview process. The theme of 'lack of engagement' and the coded responses that informed the sub-themes can be seen in figure 6.

Figure 6

Coded responses from the theme of 'Lack of Engagement' and the corresponding sub-themes

Theme: Lack of Engagement								
Sub-theme: Lack of Agency			**Sub-theme: Lack of Voice**			**Sub-theme: Lack of Support**		
Student Responses	**Teacher Responses**	**Student &Teacher responses**	**Student Responses**	**Teacher Responses**	**Student &Teacher responses**	**Student Responses**	**Teacher Responses**	**Student &Teacher responses**
Unable to make decisions	Incapable of making decisions	No alternatives	Inability to advocate	No desire for	No room for	Lack of support	Who to support and	

				alternate voices	alternate voices	from teachers	perceived equality	
Feelings of Powerlessness							Support as earned	

5.2.1: Lack of Agency

This first sub-theme to be addressed relates to the extent to which autistic student participants and teacher participants believe that autistic students in general are able to exert power over their education and the direction it takes. As may be deduced from the title of this sub-theme, interview responses from teacher and student participants revealed that autistic students in general were believed by both groups to have a lack of agency in relation to their education. Autistic students, for example, reported that they were unable to make decisions relating to their education.

> I can't do anything different in school. I just have to do what the teachers say. I can't do things how I know work for me like standing up or shaking my hands. I can't take a break, I can't put my hands on my ears if it's too loud, I can't have things done differently even though I am different. It is a lot and it gets me very tired. I have to do everything the same but I am not the same. (Liam)
>
> It's just…everything is the same. When It doesn't work for me, It's still the same. I am autistic so I am different but if I am different why does school not let me be different? I go to this school because it's not a public school. It should be a nice school but it is the same as every school. They make us sit and watch and that's how we learn but I don't learn that way. The teachers know I learn in a different way but they don't care. Everything has to be the same! (Alexander)

Both Liam and Alexander display acute awareness that the pedagogical practices employed in their respective classrooms do not benefit them or their learning. Despite this insight however, neither student has the ability to influence decisions concerning their education that could provide them with a more meaningful school experience. Alexander outlines what could be described as an example of Freire's 'banking model of education' (Freire,

1968) where students are expected to sit, listen, and learn. This is a popular teaching strategy in Chinese public schools that, based on participant responses given in interview, would appear to have made its way into Chinese internationalised schools, despite assertions to the contrary from the schools themselves.

> Yeah, well, we have to just sit and listen and remember what the teacher said and they always are right. But, I just can't listen or think. I just think about my cat. We did a fun class where there were lots of different groups and things on tables and I remember everything we did. I would do really good in school if that's what we had to do but I can't say I want that. They won't let me do anything different. (Kate)

> School is so bad! I know I am different, the teachers know I am different but I have to sit and listen and sit and listen every day. I don't like it but nothing will change because I can't just do something different so I sit and listen and hope that if I can go to college, it will be better. (Michael)

> Urgh, I wish I can do things that help me in school but I can't. They don't let me do what I need to do. I just have to remember what the teacher says, sit and not move, write what the teacher says and just be really boring. It doesn't help me. (James).

In each response, the student participants stated that nothing was done differently in their classrooms to accommodate their needs as autistic learners. They felt as though nothing they did would result in change as they lacked the agency of decision-making that would allow beneficial changes to be made. Their inability to make decisions did not stem from not knowing that they were autistic, or that their learning preferences and profile may look different from a neurotypical peer. On the contrary, they were fully aware of their autism diagnosis and were aware that the methods of education and classroom practices that they experienced and were expected to conform to were not beneficial and would not lead to success. Despite this awareness and, as John mentioned, despite 'always saying to the teacher that I want to do things in my way that can help', autistic student participants felt prevented from being able to make decisions about their education due to being enrolled in an education system that leaves little room for diversity.

As a result of this inability to make decisions relating to their education, autistic student participants all reported feelings of powerlessness that stemmed from and reinforced their lack of agency. Both Steve and Rory, for example, specifically spoke about the fact that not being able to make decisions about their education left them feeling as though their education was happening to them and despite them instead of with them and for them.

> It's really stupid and the teachers just make all the plans and they say what is going to happen. I know me better than they do but they know that what they do is not working and they know I'm different but they won't let anything different happen. It is like I'm not important and they have to do it this way and I just get in the way. I can't do anything. I have no rights in education. (Steve)
>
> So, it's me going to school and it's me learning and I know me better than anyone else knows me so I can help with me going to school? That's what I think but that doesn't happen. The teachers do everything and we just do what they say. It's like, I should be the boss because it's *my* grades and *my* learning things but the teacher is always the boss. I am just like a piece of a car. I think I should be the car in my life but I'm just a piece of the car. (Rory)

These sentiments were echoed by other autistic student participants who expressed feelings of powerlessness due to wanting to make decisions relating to their education but not being afforded the opportunity to do so.

> I feel like I can't do anything because I know how I can learn really good but the teachers are making all the decisions. They don't let me do anything different even if it will work for me and help me learn more. I just don't know what to do. I feel so sad about it. (Andy)
>
> I really want to do things how I want them. If the teacher let me just one time I could show them that it works that way but if I try then I have to go and see the principal so now it's like I don't try anymore. I can't do anything to help me be good at learning. I know what I need but I can't get it. It makes me feel so like this *lets out an exaggerated sigh and slumps forwards with his head out of view of the video camera on the desk* it makes me feel like that. (Peter).

Owing to the nature of the Chinese education system, it could be argued that very few students, be they autistic or neurotypical, would be able to influence decisions regarding their education and feel powerful in doing so. The perception of the autistic student participants, however, was that their neurotypical classmates did have at least some control over their education, leading to further feelings of powerlessness on the part of the autistic students.

> It’s not fair because my classmates do get to do stuff different. If they want to work in a group or do some talking or like do their work differently then they can. The students who don’t listen don’t get to though. But I do listen but I still don’t get to do things in the way it should be for me. It’s not fair and I feel like I don’t want to try anymore. It just makes me tired. (Liam)

> It's only me that doesn’t get to do all the things differently. The teachers say because I have autism then I have to do it their way. My classmates get to do things differently but I don’t. If no one got to do things differently, it would be okay and it would not be good but everyone would be the same. It makes me sad because it’s only me that’s not allowed to do things differently. I feel like I can’t do anything in school. Only my teachers can do things for me if they want to. (Michael)

Whilst it could be argued that the only people who would be qualified to say whether or not they were allowed to employ their sense of agency in the classroom and were able to have personal control over their education would be the neurotypical students referred to in Liam and Michael’s statements, the fact that autistic student participants believe their neurotypical classmates to possess that agency, when they do not, goes some way towards generating the feelings of powerlessness that were reported by them. Furthermore, teacher responses would suggest that autistic student participants are justified in their belief that it is only they who are denied educational agency. Interviews with teacher participants revealed a belief on their part that autistic students are simply incapable of making decisions relating to their education. It was clear, however, that this belief only extended to autistic students rather than to students in general. Responses from teachers Helen and Louise demonstrate this finding more clearly.

> I think it’s not if they should make decisions. They *can’t* make decisions. It’s what autism is like. They are not able to make decisions so I must make them for the children. The other children can make their own decisions because they are normal kids but autistic kids are not normal. They can’t think in the same way so I must

> decide for them what is good or not good for their learning. Don't listen to when they say that they can make their own things and they can know what to do. (Helen)
>
> They are autistic kids so they should do what I tell them to do because I'm the teacher and I'm normal. I can think better and I know what they need so I make the decisions for them. For the other kids I don't have to because they are normal kids but for autistic kids I need to do that. If I don't do it they will be crazy and not know what to do. So, I decide for them. (Louise)

Whilst the opinions held by these teacher participants are objectionable, they seem to stem from a genuine belief that autistic people are incapable of making decisions for themselves rather than from a desire to curtail the freedoms and rights of autistic people from malice or spite.

> I have to do everything for them (autistic students) because they can't do it on their own. They need a teacher to do it all. It is tiring but we can't let them decide because it will not be good. They don't think in a normal way and I will have to talk with my principal if they are doing bad things so I make them do what I want. (Lily)
>
> Yeah, they need me to decide for them. I know how they learn best and I know how to help them. Other students can maybe decide these things but autism kids need us to do it for them. This is what we do at school and I think if this was not what I did probably my boss would be angry. This is what we do and what we should do. (Penny)

This teacher response reaffirms the view that autistic students are incapable of making their own decisions relating to their education, but also indicates that this attitude is one that exists at the macro level and is not simply one that is adopted on a class-by-class basis. In talking with Bill, a teacher in a management position, it was possible to gain a greater insight into what the teachers mean when they are referring to autistic students being incapable of making decisions and the backlash they would face from their principal if they attempted to let autistic students make their own decisions in the classroom.

(JH) You've said that autistic students can't make their own decisions and that teachers shouldn't be encouraging that in the classroom. Can you tell me a little more about that please?

(Bill) They are not so normal, and they don't know what is best for them, but our teachers do know. They are the teachers, and they know how to take the autistic kids. They know about their problems, and they know what to do. The kids do not though.

(JH) So, is this all kids don't know or just autistic kids don't know?

(Bill) Autistic kids…normal kids we can do more with them. They can make decisions at school but autistic kids can't.

(JH) So what would happen if an autistic student was allowed to make their decisions in school?

(Bill) That would be a bad thing for the teacher. They know that we're not doing that. We have rules for kids who are not normal. If we have them doing what they want it would be too hard and they would be too noisy, and the teacher would not have good teaching.

(JH) So, you're saying that you have rules you have to follow when you teach autistic people?

(Bill) Yes, but all kids who are not normal. We have to teach them in these ways because they don't know themselves how to learn and how to be good in school.

(JH) Ah okay, I understand…So, these rules…who makes these rules?

(Bill) Well…they have always been like this…we do them because it's the right thing. It's always been this way…we can't change it because it's how it should be. They are not normal kids. They can't make good decisions. We need to make these decisions for them. Teachers saying they (autistic students) can make decisions won't happen because they can't. They can't make their decisions.

What became apparent from talking with Bill was that preventing autistic students from making decisions in matters relating to their education and the concept that autistic people are incapable of making decisions related to their education is a policy or an attitude that exists only for students who are deemed abnormal. The presumption that giving autistic children the chance to make their own decisions will lead to a loss of control in the classroom is seemingly based on an ill-informed notion of what autism actually is. An inaccurate understanding of autism results in teachers harbouring the idea that autistic students are incapable of making their own decisions, whilst educational leaders further reinforce this viewpoint by presenting a rigid framework within which to teach neurodivergent learners, a framework that must be adhered to at all costs lest the classroom is unable to function. In hindsight, pushing for more concrete examples of autistic students making the 'wrong decisions' could have been beneficial during this specific interaction with Bill but was decided against lest Bill viewed this questioning as a challenge and changed his viewpoint accordingly.

The final coded response arising from the sub-theme of a lack of agency was the belief held by all participants that there were no alternatives to the current system, so that even if there were a desire on the part of teachers and students to enable autistic students to have greater agency over their education, there were no means whereby this could be achieved. This issue is not concerned with the will to change a particular system, but with the perceived likelihood of being able to change a system when there are no alternative systems or methods in existence. The belief that no system change is possible, even if the idea of change were supported, raises the prospect that the lack of agency currently experienced by autistic students in matters concerning their education will continue into the future. It was this aspect of lack of agency in the future that was the focus of the autistic student participants when talking about the prospects for alternative education practices that would be of benefit to them.

> Nothing will ever change…Like, I will go to college I hope and then other kids the same thing will happen. They (teachers) have said that this is what it is like, and this is how we learn so nothing will change. The teachers think it and so do the principals. They told my mom this is what it is like. So, nothing will change and there is no other way to do it. There is nothing to change to. I will leave and they will always do it with other kids in 100 years. (Alexander)

> I want teachers to let me decide in school, but they never will. I don't think they can! They say this is how it always is and how we must always do it like this, so it has to be like this. I don't think there is any different way. It's that they don't want

> to but also that if they want to there is no way to do it in a different way. If there is no way and no other way to do stuff and to let me decide then I will never decide things in school. No one like me will ever decide anything. (Rory)
>
> No, it will never be different…everything that the teachers say, they have said for ages of time. So like, I want to make my choices in school but just me wanting to doesn't mean that anything will change. They can't change because they don't want to but also because they don't have anything to change to. It makes me sad because I want to make choices but I can't. I'm not allowed to by teachers but if they want me to I still can't because there is no way that I can. (Steve)

In their responses, autistic student participants recognised that their lack of agency stems from decisions made at a higher level than their teachers. They are aware that they are enrolled in an education system that leaves no room for alternative methods of education for autistic students. Teacher participant responses echoed those of the students. However, rather than lamenting the situation as the students did, they reaffirmed their stance that the current approach to the education of autistic students was the correct one and that there should be no changes to a system in which the agency over their education lies with the education system itself and the teachers.

> It is the right way to teach those students. We don't have different ways of teaching them but if we did, I wouldn't want to use them. I don't want those ways to change because they are the best. These students are not normal so we give them normal when we teach this way. Yes, we also do this because there is not another way but I think there is not another way because this way is the best and will always be the best. (Tom)
>
> Oh, new ways? No, we don't need new ways. We bring the best of west and of China together. In China our grades are the best and our students are the best. In the west you have the colleges that have good reputations, but it is *our* students who go to them. We have the best teaching especially for those autistic students. Why would we want to change how we teach them? They find many things hard, so we make it easy for them. They just have to do what we say. (Alan)

> No, they need the way of teaching that we have now. These autistic kids and any kids who are not so normal we have to teach in this way. It is good thing that there is not another way because you want to make it so they can go to college easier and get the good jobs but we need normal children to have these jobs. This way is the best way for not normal kids who cannot think in the right way so we should always do this way. It's good no other way is here. (Clare)

Although teacher participants seemed pleased that there are no alternative methods of educating autistic children in China, their reasons for being pleased differed. Clare, for example, felt that the current method of autistic education was beneficial as it ensured jobs for neurotypical children in the future, whilst Alan's response was more humanistic in that his motivation for wanting to maintain the status quo in relation to educational strategies for autistic students was to make life a little easier for them. Regardless of the reasons for the opinions, however, what is clear is that, whilst both teacher and student participants recognised that there are no alternative forms of education in China, autistic student participants expressed their dismay at this reality whilst teacher participants welcomed it.

The student and teacher responses outlined above have Illustrated the fact that autistic students do not have educational agency within Chinese internationalised schools. The lack of educational agency is deep rooted and is recognised by autistic student and teacher participants alike. Autistic students are unable to make decisions about their education, resulting in feelings of powerlessness, teachers do not consider autistic students capable of making decisions relating to their education, and both students and teachers recognise that there is currently no possibility of autistic students acquiring educational agency since there are no opportunities for alternative methods of education for autistic students attending internationalized schools in China.

5.2.2: Lack of Voice

The second sub-theme to emerge under the theme of 'lack of engagement' was a 'lack of voice' in matters relating to the education of autistic students in Chinese internationalised schools. This sub-theme is related to the sub-theme of lack of agency, but differs in that is concerned with the extent to which autistic students are included in discussions about themselves, the extent to which they are able to offer their viewpoints and preferences, and the extent to which they are able to speak up for themselves when practices that are in place are not beneficial for them or their learning. In essence, the term voice in this context refers to the existence and acknowledgement of the alternative autistic voice that is able to break through traditional discussions around the education of autistic students in Chinese Internationalised schools.

From interviews with teacher and autistic student participants, it became evident that both groups believed that there was no room for alternative autistic voices within the realm of education in Chinese internationalised schools. As has been the case with previous issues reported upon in this findings chapter, the recognition that there is no room for alternative autistic voices elicited different attitudes and responses from the different groups. Autistic student participants expressed their disappointment and frustration at this current reality, whilst teacher participants considered this situation to be beneficial for teachers, neurotypical students, and autistic students alike.

> I know that nothing I say will make them do anything differently. I can tell them about autism and what it is like and what works and what I need so I can learn and study and go to school and be a good student but there is no one listening to all the things that I say. They have to do it the way they always do it. So even if I try and do all the things like that, there is nothing different going to happen because they can’t listen because I’m just an autistic person and I’m a student. Both things no one will change for. (Andy)

> I get upset sometimes because, when you have autism, you need things differently and like help and stuff but, in school, they have to do everything one way. If you tell them, teachers and people, that you need different things they just look at you. They don’t know what to do and they just tell you that this is what happens and this is what rules are and stuff. They can’t make anything different because they are the ones who make all the rules and you can’t have more people making more rules because then it’s like having two people in charge. It is bad but this is what happens. (Kate)

> I think that it is good when we do it like this. You cannot have lots of people making the rules. This isn’t something that we debate on. We are China. We have the Communist party. They are in charge. They are in charge of education as well as

> everything else. So we follow what they say. We don’t listen to what other people say and we have been doing well. We don’t need to listen to what other people say and we can’t because China doesn’t work like this. Autistic people should know that this is how it works in China. (Tom)
>
> We can’t have different people saying different things and it is good that we do not. It would be too difficult and too confusing and nothing would ever get done in schools like our school. If autistic people or any people say that we should do things another way we can’t listen to what they say which is good. If we did, we would get confused, and nothing would happen. So we don’t listen and we can’t listen and that is why we still have everything going well at our schools. (Alan)

Teacher participants touched upon the fact that Communist rule and the nature of China’s education and political system has removed the possibility of alternative voices. In the eyes of teacher participants this is a good thing in that it prevents the Chinese education system from becoming confused as to which path to take. When asked specifically whether it was possible that allowing alternative voices could lead to new, more beneficial methods of ‘doing’ education for both autistic and neurotypical students in Chinese internationalised schools, Louise commented that ‘our way of teaching is already the best way for normal and autistic kids and all kids…we don’t need to listen to other ways’ (Louise) whilst Alan had the following to say:

> You ask about better ways, but this is the better way. This *is* the best way! With different ways it is too difficult, and nothing happens. In the UK or America you have lots of ways of doing these things and nothing gets done well but in China no one says it is bad because it is not bad. It is really good. This is the best way. What we do now is the best way and we don’t need new ways. It was good with *KongZi* (Confucious) and it is good now. (Alan)

What can be seen here is a disconnect between what is deemed beneficial to autistic students from the point of view of the teacher participants and the point of view of the autistic student participants. Whilst both acknowledge that there is currently no room for alternative voices in the Chinese education system, teacher participants maintain that this is beneficial and upholds Chinese superiority in the realm of education. From the perspective of the autistic student participants, however, the absence of an alternative voice means that autistic voices, that may well advocate for a different approach, are absent from any conversation. The result is the continued propagation of an education system founded over two thousand years ago as best practice in the twenty-first century.

Related to the idea that there is no room for alternative voices comes the finding that there is no *desire* for alternative voices. This was revealed in interviews with teacher participants when discussing what could happen on a theoretical level and whether, if circumstances were different, a new ideal form of education would arise. In this case, all teacher participants stated that, for a variety of reasons, they would not want autistic voices to be included in discussions concerning education. Alan, for example, a teacher who had been particularly outspoken regarding the benefits of the Chinese education system, continued his defence of current methods of education and was vehemently opposed to autistic voices having any input into the educational practices at Chinese internationalised schools.

> No, even if it was different and if we had different rules I would not want them to be able to decide how we teach and what we do in our schools. Why should students who are not so normal be the ones who decide how we teach and what we do? They would make it bad and confusing for normal students. I would always want our schools and our teaching to stay like they are now. We don’t want not normal students telling us how we should teach them. We know how to teach them and we know what is best. We don’t want them saying these things. (Alan)

Lily, on the other hand, expressed her support for excluding hypothetical autistic voices on the basis that autistic students can never truly know what is best for them or what they truly want because of their autism.

> No, they should not be allowed to talk about what they *need* in school because they don’t really need what they think they do. They don’t know themselves but we know them. They think maybe they know but they have autism so they will be wrong about that and about what they need or what they want. Someone who has mental problems we would not listen to them and autism is like a mental problem. What they say is not what they mean. They don’t know what they mean but we do. (Lily)

Nora, Helen, and Louise all agreed with Lily that autistic students should not have their voices heard in conversations about education owing to their belief that autistic students are unable to discern what is best for them. They were all also in agreement with Alan that the risks of allowing autistic voices into conversations about education would lead to confusion and to decisions being made that would be to the detriment of neurotypical students.

> They don't know what they want but if they did it would be so bad because normal students don't think like them. Normal kids would not have a good education anymore like they have now. (Nora)
>
> It would be the wrong thing because it would be so much confusion and so bad…Autistic kids don't know what they need because they are not normal but if they were deciding what they need I don't know how bad everything would be but it would be really bad for them and normal kids. (Helen)
>
> No no no…It can never happen that autism kids are allowed to say what they want and need. They don't know! We would have schools where we could not do work and scream and just crazy all the time. The normal kids would do what? Maybe they go to special normal schools to get what they need!? No it is a very bad idea. (Louise)

Throughout this 'findings' chapter, a recurring theme on the part of the teacher participants has been the idea that a diagnosis of autism would lead to one being considered incapable. Since those diagnosed with autism are considered by their teachers to be incapable, the teachers would not listen to the voices of autistic students, even on a hypothetical or theoretical level. This finding, coupled with the reality that there are no alternative voices within the Chinese education system, means that autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools are given no opportunity to advocate for themselves or to use their voice in any form. Had teacher participants been open to listening to the voices of autistic students, this may have had the potential to lead to change in the future. However, an absolute refusal to listen to autistic student voices eliminates this possibility.

Autistic student participants all agreed that they were unable to advocate for themselves. They all commented that the dominance of the Chinese education system, even within Chinese internationalised schools, together with the refusal of their teachers or individual schools to listen to autistic voices, left them feeling that there was no possibility of using their voice and advocating for themselves and their educational rights, wants, and needs. This belief is best articulated by John and Peter who, during their respective interviews, had the following to say:

> We can't say anything that we need. There is no way to say what I need, and no one will listen. My school and my teachers don't listen, and I will be a bad student if I say that things don't work when I'm not allowed to say it. I can't speak for myself, and I can't tell anyone what autism needs in school because they won't listen, and I will be bad if I say things. (John)

> Yeah, I can never say what I want or what I need in my school. Everything means that there is no way I can say that I need things to be different. I can't ask for anyone to do anything different, and I can't get help that will help me in school. I know about autism but it's like everyone is full. I can tell them, but they won't listen. I can't even get to where I can tell people. There is no way to say anything except what the schools say. (Peter)

Interestingly, Peter refers to teachers as being 'full' and that he 'can't get to where I can tell people.' These views were echoed by other student participants who commented that autistic voices were 'blocked' (Liam), 'ignored by teachers' (James), and 'not wanted when we talk about what we need when we're in school' (Steve). Furthermore, student participants highlighted the fact that simply finding an audience to listen to one's voice was an even more monumental task due to the fact that communist party control of the education system leaves no avenues or opportunities for alternative voices to be heard.

> No one will listen to us...you have to be important like in the party to make decisions and to say things. We are not important so we will not be able to speak about what things we need in school. (Alexander)

> There is no way to talk about the things we need because only the government can do that. My Mom said that they are the ones who can make the changes. They are the only thing people can listen to. Only they can speak and say how things should

> be. They can talk about autism and about schools if they want to but only they can. I can't and no one else can. (Rory)

The fact that the autistic student participants, the oldest of whom was just seventeen years of age, recognised the dominant role of the Chinese Communist Party in the education system in China is a telling indication of the level of control exerted by the party in matters relating to education. That teenage students were able to specifically identify the body that is denying them the opportunity to speak and preventing their voices from being heard indicates that this problem is so ingrained in the system that, as yet, there is little hope of change. Analysis of the interview responses show that both teacher and autistic student participants recognise that there is no room for autistic voices, that teacher participants do not want to listen to autistic voices and would not wish to do so if they were given the opportunity to speak, and that autistic student participants believe that they have no voice with which to advocate for themselves. These three factors ultimately lead to the finding that autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools experience a lack of voice in matters relating to them and to their education.

5.2.3: Lack of Support

The final sub-theme within the theme of 'lack of engagement' is 'lack of support'. It relates to teacher opinions as to who should be supported and the concept of equality in the classroom, the issue of support being earned based on perceived and subjective positive traits, and autistic student perceptions that support from teachers is not given to the autistic population based on their failure to meet teacher expectations.

In terms of who receives support, all teacher participants interviewed believed that autistic students should not receive support on the basis that they have needs that are considered to be too challenging. Whilst this may appear counter-intuitive, teacher participants clarified this stance by explaining that autistic students should not receive support from the classroom teacher as it would leave the teacher insufficient time to teach the other children in the class, but that support given in the context of an alternative place of education, such as a special school, would be appropriate.

> No they should not get support because who will give them support? If I am giving them the support they need so much. They can't do things on their own so I will have to be with them all the time. So what will the children in the class do if their

> teacher is with just one student? They can have support in a different school but this is a normal school. They shouldn't get support here. (Helen)

> It's not our job to support autistic kids and I don't think we should. They need so much and we can't give it to them. We are just normal teachers not autism teachers, Maybe in a school for disabled children they will get support and there it will be good. But we can't give them support here because it's too much for us to do. In this school we don't give support because if they come here they don't need support. (Clare)

> They have so much things they need help with. We should not be giving support because we are a private school. That means we can accept who we want and if we accept you it means that you shouldn't need support so I think that autistic kids should not have support if they come here. They need lots of support if they need support so they should go to another school where they can get more help. We aren't supposed to help so much. (Lily)

Whilst this extract from the interviews with Helen has been included as an example of teacher participant attitudes, all teachers interviewed shared the same attitude to offering support to autistic students within their respective internationalised schools. On further questioning, however, it became apparent that some of the teachers believed that not only should autistic students not be supported in schools on the basis that they need more support than a school is able to offer, but that they should not be supported within Chinese internationalised schools because they do not belong in school in general. This belief stems from the teachers' opinions that any support provided to autistic students would be a waste owing to the status of autistic people in Chinese society and their negligible prospects of success.

> Why should we help them? They should not be here, but they have to be somewhere, and they might have money so they come here. But we should not help them. They won't do anything with the help because their brain doesn't work that way. We can help other students and it will be more useful but for autistic kids, they won't do anything with the help we give them so we should not. (Alan)

> It is kind of not helpful to help because what will they do with it? I think maybe we shouldn't help them at school because autistic students won't get help later. They won't really do anything later. They won't get help in their jobs because they won't have jobs so really, we shouldn't help them. It is better we help normal children at school not autistic children or kids like that. (Ella)

In other instances, teacher participants indicated that they considered it an unjust practice to provide a student with academic or social support on the basis that 'giving some kids help and other kids no help is the wrong thing to do…everyone should be the same' (Penny). This view was echoed when making specific reference to autistic students since their perceived support needs were deemed to be so great that equality between autistic students and neurotypical students, considered by the teacher participants to be their goal, would never be achieved in the classroom or in the wider school community.

> We are a country where everyone is the same. It's not like in America, everyone here is the same and that is what we want so we can't give autistic kids that much help in school. It's not fair for the other kids who don't get that much help. We can give everyone lots of help but we don't have enough people for that or we can give no one lots of help which is the best way to make everything the same and to help people be strong on their own. (Bill)

> If we give lots of help in school to autistic kids it just won't be fair to the normal kids. We need everyone to be equal because we are one in China and we are all the same. So, I think if we help autistic kids it will make it unfair because they will do better with help. They didn't do it on their own really. It will be us doing it for them and we don't do the work for other kids so it is best that we don't help. Everyone is the same then. (Nora)

This notion of equality, as espoused by the teacher participants, indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of student support and an equity-based model of education in which students with disabilities may receive support so as to mitigate the challenges they may face as a result of their disabilities. The teachers' equality model of education actively disadvantages autistic students as they are not being provided with the support they may need to fully access and engage with their education.

Whilst expressing their belief in equal treatment for autistic and non-autistic students, teacher participants also reported that that support could be earned and would be given on the basis that a student possesses various desirable attributes to be determined, seemingly at random, by a teacher. Ironically, not only is this approach diametrically opposed to the teacher contention that every student should be treated equally, but a system that allows teachers to offer support to some students but not to others based on a personal checklist is totally out of keeping with principles of equality.

JH So, you've said that you don't think autistic students should be given support because it'll draw attention to them and other students will say it's not fair?

Louise Yes, I think it would be unfair to other students.

JH So are there any situations where you might give a child support in the classroom.

Louise Yes, the good kids I can give support to because they listen and do what I say so I think they have done a good job so I can help them more.

JH Okay, so it's like a reward? Support as a reward is that right?

Louise Yes, it's like this. If they are good students and have done everything then I can help them more. The same with a job. If you work hard you get more money but we can't pay kids haha! So we can like 'pay' them with more help for doing good.

JH So, how do you decide who gets the support? Do you have a checklist or something or do they have to do specific things to be considered as having done a good job? Ha, what makes a good job a good job is what I'm really asking.

Louise Well, it's like I know what they need to do and I see it and I recognise it but it's hard to explain. It's like a feeling if I like them and think they can have more help.

JH So it's if you like them as well?

Louise Yes, of course!

JH Have you ever felt like giving autistic students in your class throughout your career this support? Have you had that feeling that they can have more help or have they done the things that they need to do?

Louise No, never. I think one maybe did the things they had to do. They were good at math but I didn't have the feeling with them that I should give more help.

JH You're saying that you didn't have the feeling? The feeling you didn't like them or another feeling about other things?

Louise Maybe that I didn't like them.

In this conversation with Louise, her initial statement regarding fairness between autistic and non-autistic students unravelled as she went on to describe a meritocratic system of support in the classroom in which those students who met her requirements and whom she liked were supported whilst autistic students were not. This same stance was adopted by teacher participants across the board and was epitomised by Tom during his interview.

> I will give help to those who *deserve* it. If they do what I ask, if they listen, if they are smart and good I can give them lots of help. They are the kid I like so of course I give them lots of help. For autistic kids, the ones I have had in class before I don't like them so much. They don't do what I ask or what they should do and they are not so smart. For them I won't give them help. Help is something that I don't have to give. I teach and they listen but help is if I want to. I want to help the good kids be even better. The bad kids I don't have to help. (Tom)

The provision of support to children who seemingly 'deserve' the support is extremely problematic given that the criteria for being considered deserving by the teacher participants would seem to exclude autistic students whose well-documented challenges with social interaction and communication , executive functioning, and task starting, switching, and joint attention mean that they are never likely to match up to the Chinese teacher model of what a good student should look like and are unlikely, therefore, to ever be deemed deserving of support.

The attitudes of teachers did not go unnoticed by the autistic student participants. Based on their own experiences, they commented overwhelmingly that they believed they received insufficient support from their teachers due to their teachers' prejudice against autistic people specifically and against any forms of difference in general.

> We don't get support from the teachers because they say we are not normal. They have lots of help they can give but they don't because we are autistic. One of my

> teachers said that they just didn’t like me so they wouldn’t help me. It is a normal thing now I think in China. Even in schools like this. They just don’t like us because we are autistic and they hate when people are different so they just will not help. They want us to do badly so they can get rid of us. (James)
>
> They only support normal kids not autistic ones. The teachers just don’t care about us because they are told to not care about us. They think we can’t do anything so they don’t try and help us in any way. It makes me angry because the kids they like gets lots of support but we don’t get anything just because we are a little bit different. (Michael)
>
> I think my teachers just have kids they like and everyone has to be like that classmate. If you’re not like them then the teacher doesn’t like you and they won’t help you because they always say that it’s your fault or your mistake. Because I’m autistic so I’m not like the teacher’s favourite classmate. The teachers never give me help because I’m too different. They think it is useless to help me so I don’t get any help ever. (Liam)

Moreover, autistic student participants revealed that they believed the prejudice against autistic people and the refusal of teachers to support autistic students to stem from a lack of understanding as to what autism is and how to support autistic people. This, in turn, led to a fear of autistic students in the classroom and a resultant unwillingness to provide support.

> I think they don’t support us because they don’t know about autism. When they don’t know something, they don’t like that so they don’t like us. We make them think about things they don’t know so they maybe feel scared and that is why they don’t like us so much. They don’t help us because we are like aliens to them and they don’t want to say that they don’t know about us. (Rory)
>
> They are scared of us…That is why they don’t support or help us because we make them feel like they don’t know stuff. They don’t know it though. They don’t know about autism and they don’t want to learn. So they don’t like us because we show them what they don’t know. They don’t help us because of this. They would want us to not exist instead of learning about us. (Alexander)

Although the opinion voiced by Alexander that teachers in Chinese internationalised schools would rather autistic students did not exist is a bold one, it is a concept that has been hinted at throughout all the sub-themes of the theme of ‘lack of engagement’. The interviews with autistic student participants and teacher participants have highlighted that within Chinese internationalised schools autistic students are denied their agency relating to themselves and their education, are denied their voice in matters relating to their education, and are denied support from their teachers in the course of their education. Furthermore, not only did teacher participants recognise that current systems resulted in a lack of engagement on the part of autistic students in the Chinese internationalised schools they are enrolled in, they actively encouraged and engaged in practices that would ensure that this reality would continue. For these reasons, it is evident that autistic students experience a lack of engagement in their Chinese internationalised schools. It could also be the case, in line with the comment made by Alexander, that these teacher participants, at least, would rather that autistic students did not exist.

5.3 Findings: School and Preparation

The final theme to emerge from the thematic analysis of the data collected during the course of this research was ‘School and Preparation”. As a result of the fact that the participant responses which led to the development of this theme were often intertwined and inseparable, no specific sub-themes were identified to form the over-arching theme. That being said, thematic elements or coded responses were still identified that were related to the schooling of autistic students in Chinese internationalised schools and the extent to which this schooling prepares them for the wider world as seen from the viewpoint of both teacher and autistic student participants. Figure 7 shows what the coded responses that make up the theme of ‘school and preparation’. Unlike sections 5.1 and 5.2 of this chapter, where each sub-section related to a specific sub-theme, the sub-sections in section 5.3 will address firstly student and teacher responses and then student responses for ease of understanding and readability.

Figure 7

Coded responses from the theme of 'School and Preparation' and the corresponding sub-themes

Theme: School and Preparation		
Student Responses	**Teacher Responses**	**Student and Teacher Responses**
Excitement to leave Concerns about the future Feelings of hopelessness		Not ready for what comes next Low chance of work

5.3.1: Student and Teacher Responses

All participants agreed that autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools had not been fully prepared for life after school and the transition into adulthood, and that autistic students who have graduated from Chinese internationalised schools had a low chance of gaining employment in the future. Although they agreed on the outcomes for autistic students, they disagreed on the factors responsible for those outcomes.

Autistic student participants, most of whom were coming to the end of their time at school, felt that they were not fully prepared for life outside school and not ready for 'what comes next' because they had not been adequately included, valued, heard, or supported during their time at school.

> I think my school was really bad…They didn't help me, or support me, or give me anything really. They didn't even listen to me. I don't think it has made me ready for leaving school at all. Even in those classes where they talk about leaving school they don't include me. I don't think my school even thinks about me leaving and doing something else. Maybe they do but if they do, they don't care. (Alexander)

> I'm not ready for leaving school. In school I learned that I'm not very important, that I should be quiet, that nobody cares, and that I'm bad at everything and a bad

> student. I don't think this has made me ready. I had no friends and my teachers didn't like me and I spent my time just being quiet and not getting told off by the teacher. I don't think this has helped me be ready for leaving school. (Rory)

> I have learned nothing in my time in school so it hasn't made me ready for what comes next. It's like, other kids, normal kids, learned all that stuff but I was left on my own for all my time in school so I didn't learn any of these things. I was just told I'm doing stuff wrong and not listened to or anything. So I don't think that this has made me ready for leaving school. (Andy)

Interestingly, teacher participants did not disagree with anything that the autistic student participants were saying. From their perspective, however, the reason that autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools are not ready for 'what comes next' is because they have been enrolled in a school that is not designed for them and have had unrealistic expectations that, despite an autism diagnosis, their education would be the same as that of non-autistic students.

> I don't think they are ready for leaving school because this school is not the place for them. They should always go to disabled schools not schools like this. They can't learn anything here but they want everything to be the same as normal kids, but it is not going to be like that. It is their fault not our fault. We teach them this way because they are like this but they think they can learn things here when they can't. We tell them this and we show them this but they want to stay. So it is their fault that they are not ready for leaving school. (Tom)

> Yes, I think they are not ready for leaving school. They will never be ready because of how they are. I don't think they should be able to but also they shouldn't have been able to come here to go to school but they do. We can't teach them in these schools but they come and they don't learn and then they think they can't leave school. They need to go to schools that can make them better but we cannot do that. We are a normal school and they are not normal so they are not ready to go to leave school because they are not normal and not designed for these schools. (Ella)

> Having them in these schools just does not work. They don't learn anything and they are not ready for when they leave school. They don't do anything and all they

> do now is leave and take from people. They won't give back to China. They need help to do everything. They are not ready to leave because these schools are not the schools they should go to. They should go to other schools. To schools for kids like them. Maybe then they would be ready for something? (Louise)

Louise's comment that autistic students wouldn't contribute anything towards China highlights an issue that was touched upon by both teacher and autistic student participants in relation to the poor work prospects of autistic students as a result of the failure of their education to prepare them for 'what comes next'. The autistic students believed the low possibility of them finding work stemmed from the negative attitudes towards autistic people that they had experienced throughout their time at school.

> In school from when I remember, the teacher didn't like me, my school didn't like me, my classmates didn't like me. But these are the people that I have to live with when I leave school. These are the people who give jobs and who do all those things. I went to school but I was not allowed to join in and everyone hates me. How will it change when I leave school? I sat at the back and didn't learn, I didn't get grades, and I don't have friends. The teacher says I won't have a job and they are right I won't have a job. (James)

> School just made people hate me. Everyone was told that I am not normal. How will I work and have a job when everyone thinks that I can't do anything? Even my teachers think it and say it. They have said it over a long time so when I leave and try and work and I say I am autistic my boss will say oh no and they won't want to give me a job. If you're not normal like me then forever it has been that we won't have any work or a job to do. (Steve)

Teacher participants believed that autistic students would struggle to find work simply because being autistic makes employment very difficult or impossible, They recognised that the schooling received by autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools was ineffective in promoting their employment prospects, but maintained that this was because autistic students should not be attending mainstream schools.

> Of course, they won't have work or jobs…This is what we keep saying to them. They come to this school and we can't teach them and we don't want to teach them

> and they are sad when they can't work. They need to go to a school that is for kids like that because our school cannot do it for them. We cannot help them. They are not ready for work because they are not normal and going to a normal school does not help them. In another school maybe they could find some type of work but not from this type of school. We can't help them with that. (Alan)

> They have autism so how would they have a job? We are a normal school so we don't help kids like this with getting work after. All of our kids have work after or they go to college because they are normal. How do autistic kids think this will happen when they go to our school? Our school for normal students? We tell them to go to a different school. When they don't we teach them how we are told and then they leave and cannot do anything because they went to the wrong school. (Lily)

Not only does this viewpoint place the blame of not being able to find work after school onto autistic students, but it also perpetuates the idea that autistic students are 'unteachable' within the context of Chinese internationalised schools. Whilst autistic student participants believe that their schooling does not prepare them for life after school and does not help them gain meaningful employment, teacher participants, far from disagreeing with this belief, maintain that it is not the job of Chinese internationalised schools to prepare autistic students for life outside of school and to help them gain meaningful employment. Simply put, 'these schools are not supposed to be for autistic kids. We are not built for them, and we don't have to give them anything' (Penny).

5.3.2: Student Responses

Autistic student participants reported feeling hopeless about the future as a result of their education. Whilst they did express relief to leave their Chinese internationalised schools, they did not believe that their time spent at their schools had been productive, nor did they feel as though they would have opportunities in the outside world after graduating from school.

> I'm glad I can leave but I feel as though now there is nothing. In school I did nothing and I didn't learn anything. People and teachers treat me bad in school and they will out of school too. So I guess I feel sad about that. I don't think anything

> will change. School just made me think that people are like this and not so nice so I guess it made me ready to be seen this way forever. (Michael)
>
> Yeah, I want to go and leave but then what will I do? School has just done nothing for me except make me feel sad and make people not like me. So when I leave I don't think anything will be different. I want to leave but it will probably be the same when I leave. I just don't know. Maybe I can like give up? Just live me and my cat. (Kate)
>
> I graduate and then what will happen? We get nothing from school. I want to leave this bad place but I'll just go to another bad place. I'm really tired of having to do all this and be like this. It's just like shit and urgh! School didn't want kids like me and now I don't want to be there and when I leave it'll be the same out of school. I just want to stay home maybe every day. I don't know. Sorry for saying bad words. (Liam)

These responses from autistic student participants provide an appropriate summary of the feelings of autistic student participants in relation to the quality of the education they have received from Chinese internationalised schools and the extent to which they are able to prepare them for life after school.

The purpose of this chapter has been to accurately describe the findings uncovered during this piece of research. Responses from both autistic student participants and teacher participants have shown that autistic students are not valued by Chinese internationalised schools, are not engaged in them, and are not prepared for life by them. Moreover, this chapter has revealed that not only are autistic student participants aware that they are not valued, engaged, or prepared for life by their schools, but that teacher participants actively believe that autistic students hold no value, are incapable of engagement and should not be engaged, and will never be prepared for life by Chinese internationalised schools. The belief held by all teacher participants is that autistic students do not belong in Chinese internationalised schools and that Chinese internationalised schools have not been and never could or should be developed with the needs of autistic students in mind. These findings have positioned autistic students enrolled in school in China as being disadvantaged by the very education system that was theorised to offer them a more socially just method of education.

Chapter 6: Discussion

In the previous 'findings' chapter, it was identified that autistic student participants who attend Chinese internationalised schools and teacher participants who teach in them all believe that their schools do not value autistic students, do not engage them, and do not prepare them for life after secondary education. From the point of view of the student participants, the education they receive completely fails to meet their needs and was considered by them to be belittling and not fit for purpose. From a teacher participant perspective, autistic students attending these schools are an unwanted drain on resources and are enrolled in an education system that is not and never will be designed with their needs in mind. For teacher participants, autistic students represent a challenge to the remit of the Chinese education system who should be disregarded lest attention given to them adversely affects the development and progress of neurotypical students enrolled in the same schools. This chapter will re-visit pre-existing literature in order to ascertain whether the findings of this study accord with extant research and, if so, in what way and to what extent. It is also important to consider these findings within the context of the research sub-questions which underpin and combine together to inform the titular research question of this thesis. The purpose of the sub-questions was to ascertain the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools can provide autistic students with a more 'socially just' education, with the concept of a 'socially just' education stemming from a critical disability theory perspective of social justice. The overwhelmingly negative answers to the sub-questions are revealed and clearly signposted in the findings set out in Chapter 5. For ease of reference, the sub-questions are set out again below.

a. To what extent do autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools perceive themselves to be valued and included by their schools?

b. What attitudes do teachers who teach in Chinese internationalised schools have towards autistic students, real or hypothetical, enrolled in those schools?

c. What perceptions do autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools have of their life and employment prospects as a result of their education?

d. To what extent do Chinese internationalised schools propagate awareness of and promote neurodiversity?

e. To what extent do autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools have a 'voice' within their schools in matters relating to themselves and their education?

By using the framework of these questions together with my own interpretative position, outlined in Chapter 4, that recognises the essential contribution of lived experiences to the development of knowledge, I have attempted, through the lens of critical disability theory and with participant engagement, to discover the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools can provide autistic students with a more 'socially just' education.

The concept of a 'socially just' education is at the very heart of this thesis. From the perspective of critical disability theory, which was considered in Chapter 3, the principles of the acceptance of disability within society and of listening to disabled voices are paramount considerations of social justice. Inversely, reiterating normality and the absence of a disabled voice in matters pertaining to disability results in a society or a particular aspect of society being considered socially unjust. The extent to which Chinese internationalised schools are capable of providing a more 'socially just' education to autistic students is also inextricably linked with the concepts of power, policy, and society as they exist within the socio-political context of the People's Republic of China. It is important, therefore, that consideration be given to these concepts when discussing participant responses, their relationship with pre-existing literature and the critical disability theory concepts of the acceptance of disability/the reiteration of normality and the existence of a disabled (autistic) voice/lack of disabled (autistic) voice. With all these factors in mind, this discussion will deal separately with the notions of 'reiteration of normality' and 'lack of a disabled (autistic) voice', both of which are deemed to be disempowering by critical disability theory. Separating the discussion into these two elements allows for participant responses, extant literature, and the concepts of power, policy, and society to be considered together in a manner that would not be possible if the chapter were simply to be divided into a series of miniature discussions headed by the research sub-questions.

6.1: Reiteration of Normality

Based on participant responses during the interview process and using those responses to answer the sub-questions, it is apparent that Chinese internationalised schools reiterate and show preference towards normality rather than accepting disability, in this case autism, and the autistic experience. After considering relevant, pre-existing, literature, this finding is not particularly surprising. In the limited number of studies that have been conducted in relation to autism and the Chinese education system, teachers' negative views towards autistic students, a preference for teaching neurotypical students, and ableist understandings as to what autism is and how autistic students can be involved in the life of the school (Clark et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2013; Huang & Wheeler, 2007; Liu et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2019) have all been found to be the default approach to autism education in China, rather than the exception to the rule. Whilst it has been argued that Chinese internationalised schools provide an alternative to the more exam-orientated public education system (Young, 2018), it is important to remember that they still fall under the remit of the Chinese education department. It is understandable, and perhaps inevitable, therefore, that the same desire to reiterate normality that exists in the sphere of public education has been adopted into the realm of the internationalised school sector. Whilst the practices in place in internationalised schools could theoretically differ from those in their public-school counterparts, the overriding philosophy of the system that governs them both remains consistent in its message. Participant views that referenced the 'othering' and devaluation of autistic students on the basis that autism was not considered the 'normal' or preferred neuro-type illustrate the influence of Confucianist philosophy on Chinese society in general and on education in particular, where disabled (autistic) people are seen as lacking in value and are 'othered' as a result. Confucianist pedagogy, addressed in chapter 2 of this thesis, which can devalue the concept of disabled people receiving an education (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012), is still very much ingrained within all aspects of Chinese society (Degenhardt & Zhang, 2015; Zhang, 2014). Participant responses reported in Chapter 5 of this thesis have shown that autistic student participants were very much aware that these Confucianist attitudes persist, whilst teacher participants actively promoted and adhered to them. Pre-existing literature has highlighted the role of Confucianist beliefs in the sphere of public education in China and should, for the purposes of this research, be extended to include Chinese internationalised schools. Despite the suggestion that these schools may offer a more socially just education for autistic students, in reality they promote the same Confucianist approach to education that does not consider disabled students, but includes them, if at all, only through a sense of sympathy (Zhang, 2016; Zhang & Rosen, 2018).

Turning specifically to the autistic voices included in this research, the student participants felt overwhelmingly that they were expected to 'normalise' themselves rather than that their schools or teachers would attempt to accommodate their needs. This reiteration of the concept of a 'normal' student and preferences for such a student had been alluded to in prior research which had investigated teacher attitudes towards autistic students in public schools and kindergartens (Ballantyne et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2016, Lu et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2018) but it had not been considered from the viewpoint of autistic students themselves. Confirmation by the student participants that the concept of normality is being reiterated within Chinese internationalised schools and the fact that this is the reality for autistic students within the realm of compulsory education is particularly concerning. Love and Beneke (2021) for example, have suggested that the reiteration and perpetuation of normality within educational settings only serves to slow or even prohibit moves towards inclusive education. By reiterating the concepts of normality that are found on a societal level, educational institutions are relieved of the need to make meaningful change. As one of the participants, Bill, remarked: 'It's always been this way'. Not only does the reiteration of normality encourage power over the disabled (Hehir, 2002) and prefer the abled individual to the disabled (Goodley, 2014) but the inability to escape its influence can also have damaging effects. Those effects became evident during the course of this research in that autistic student participants had begun to internalise beliefs that they were less valuable than their neuro-typical peers. Such beliefs in relation to disabled people had been found to exist in Chinese society (Stein, 2015; Zheng et al., 2014), but the internalisation of those beliefs by the autistic students themselves and their 'defeated' reiteration of them stemmed directly from the treatment they received in the internationalised school environment, thereby refuting the idea that such schools are capable of providing a socially just education.

The policy of reiterating normality is also evident in teacher participant responses which clearly demonstrated their attitudes towards autistic students, real or hypothetical. Whilst earlier research had suggested that Chinese internationalised schools might offer a less stressful and more accepting environment for 'non-conventional' learners such as autistic students (Young, 2018), teacher participant responses showed that this was categorically not the case and illustrated teacher involvement in upholding and propagating ableist policies and practices within their classrooms and their schools as a whole. These findings accord with those of previous research that investigated teacher attitudes towards autistic students and disabled students in general in public mainstream and special schools (Ballantyne et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2016, Lu et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2018), and found that autistic students were seen as unwanted and ill-suited members of the school community. As the influence of Confucianism extends to the whole of Chinese society, not just to the sphere of public education (Bresciani, 2023; Chen, 2021; Wang & Nahm, 2019), it is not surprising to find that Chinese internationalised schools reiterate normality towards autistic students, since these schools exist within the Chinese education system. What is paradoxical, however, is that these schools came into being as a result of calls from the growing middle class for a school system that is more accommodating in nature (Poole, 2020; Young, 2018). From this perspective, it would seem that the schools are doing themselves a disservice by continuing to reiterate normality when a reasonable percentage of the demographic who attend them do so for the sole reason that they supposedly offer a different and more holistic form of education that is not as ‘black and white’ as that which is to be found in Chinese public schools (Young, 2018). To explain the contradiction between what Chinese internationalised schools promise and what they deliver, we should perhaps consider whom they serve. Beech et al. (2021) for example, makes the distinction that Chinese internationalised schools have been developed to cater for the middle-class education market, whilst Ying and Wright (2023) maintain that they provide ‘new rich’ parents the opportunity to ensure that their children are educated in a manner which will facilitate global movement and will provide the prestige of an international education whilst continuing to instil Chinese nationalist ideologies and values. This so-called ‘cosmopolitan-nationalism’ (Wright et al., 2022), therefore, allows for students at internationalised schools to be educated in institutions which accept and encourage political interference from the CCP and adhere to policy directives and changes stemming from the Chinese education department (Bunnell & Poole, 2022). That being the case, it is to be expected that Chinese internationalised schools and their teachers reiterate normality, thereby contributing to the lack of a socially just education for autistic students, especially when considering the perturbing belief that it is impossible to rid China of all ableist practices (Zhi, 2011) and that ableism will endure in certain spheres, including the highly regulated realm of education.

Whilst it may be true to say that Chinese internationalised schools provide an elite education to students who may face barriers to education (Bunnell & Poole, 2022; Young, 2018) it is also the case that not all barriers to education have been mitigated by the creation of an internationalised schooling system. Whilst the best education was previously reserved for the societal elite in China (Young, 2018), Chinese internationalised schools have allowed wealthy families to bypass the traditional social requirements for an elite education since their new-found wealth allows them to share certain characteristics with the societal elite. These characteristics do not originate from any connection to the social fabric of the nation, as may be the case when referring to the concept of a 'princeling' (Ho, 2013; Zhang, 2019) but are based purely on economic means and capital (Brooks & Waters, 2009). It remains the case that only social standing qualifies one to belong to the upper echelons of Chinese society. The fact that the 'new rich' are tolerated is partly a consequence of their wealth, but their emergence has been accepted only after careful consideration of their impact on the societal status quo. They have successfully carved their own position within the Chinese social hierarchy without displacing other members of society either below or above them. The enrolment of their children in internationalised schools has done little to disrupt the status of the societal elite or draw the ire of their prejudices (Goodman, 2008; Osburg, 2020).

In the case of autistic students attending internationalised schools, barriers to their education still exist. The fact that they are autistic and, therefore, disabled makes their position far more difficult to navigate. If wealth served as the only factor to be considered, their enrolment into these schools may have been better accepted. However, as disabled people are viewed as being at the bottom of Chinese society (Stein, 2015; Zheng et al., 2014), their inclusion in internationalised schools because of familial wealth may well be met with hostility because of the potential disruption to the social order that will follow, and which wealth cannot prevent. This could provide some explanation as to why teacher participants were so in favour of reiterating normality and so resistant to the concept of autistic students being successful in school. Whilst teachers referred to their general 'dislike' of autistic students, further investigation and questioning, as illustrated by interactions with Alan or Tom, drew out the more fundamental belief that autistic students were undeserving of an internationalised education and that they, the teachers, needed to adhere to the educational methodologies that have traditionally been used in China. This attitude could result from a fear that the well-established social order might be jeopardised by affording individuals who occupy a place at the bottom of society the same opportunities as those who constitute the new and traditional elites. From the perspective of the autistic students, however, the failure of their schools to accept and support them, based on the Confucianist belief that certain demographics cannot climb up the social hierarchy, results in a system of education that reiterates normality and which, as a result, cannot possibly provide them with a more socially just education.

6.2: Lack of a Disabled (Autistic) Voice

Drawn from my findings in Chapter five and rooted in the critical disability framework that underpins this entire thesis, the concept of a lack of a disabled voice or, in the particular context of this thesis, an autistic voice, is a theme that must be examined. Pre-existing literature concerned with the parents of autistic children in China (McCabe, 2007; McCabe-Hobart, 2008; Zhao & Fu, 2020) and teacher attitudes towards autistic students in Chinese public schools (Ballantyne et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2016, Lu et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2018) made no reference to the voices of autistic people themselves. This is not particularly surprising, given the strict social hierarchy that governs Chinese society and education in general (Law, 2020) where there would be no room for autistic voices to be heard. What is interesting, however, is that findings from extant literature relate closely with the findings of the research conducted here in relation to Chinese internationalised schools in that, despite theoretical differences between the different types of school being studied, the schools and the teachers within them were all unable or unwilling to recognise or put forward a disabled (autistic) voice, despite opportunities to do so. Furthermore, the autistic students who took part in this research were also ‘unwilling’ or unable to access their voice in matters pertaining to their education. The result, therefore, is an absence of a disabled voice that stems from the top down (the school and teachers) and is repropagated from the bottom up (autistic students).

Many of the concepts discussed in section 6.1 of this thesis, such as the adherence to and propagation of Confucianist values and the inflexibility of the Chinese education system, relate equally to the concept of a lack of a disabled (autistic) voice from the point of view of Chinese internationalised schools and the teachers who teach within them. It would be too simplistic, however, to end the discussion around the lack of a disabled (autistic) voice there. Research from the past forty years has made reference to the fact that across nations, rather than making meaningful change for disabled people, 'lip service' has been paid in relation to promoting the voice of disabled people in matters that pertain to them (Sun et al., 2019). In China, there has been a conscious effort to ensure that the illusion of a disabled voice is present in all spheres of society, with education policies and research appearing, on the surface, to be as involved as possible in promoting disabled voices (Sun et al., 2019). It is interesting, therefore, that the findings in this research that stemmed from the interviews with teachers should be so contrary to the official position of the Chinese education department of creating the illusion that disabled (autistic) voices are a priority and should be heard in matters relating to their education. This deviation from the official party line could be explained by a fear of disability and disabled voices, as demonstrated by participant responses in Chapter five and confirmed by research which found that teachers are fearful of teaching and including disabled students due to a lack of understanding of disability, and the belief that the success of disabled learners takes away from the success of others (Guan et al., 2022, Qi et al., 2023; Qu, 2022). In other nations or school systems this fear is often overcome by teachers being forced to confront their prejudices as part of their day-to-day teaching or through professional development and training (Carballo et al., 2021; Duncan et al., 2021; Fisher & Purcal, 2017) This is not the case, however, for teachers in Chinese internationalised schools. For them, a fear of disability would only continue to grow due to a lack of training and a lack of professional development opportunities in China in general (Trent, 2019; Yan & He, 2015) and due also to their adherence to a Confucianist system that vehemently opposes any change in societal attitudes towards disabled people.

In relation to Chinese internationalised schools as a whole, their lack of a disabled (autistic) voice may also be explained by their ideological set-up and purpose. As research has suggested (Wright et al., 2021; Wright & Lee, 2019; Young, 2018), these schools serve as bastions of Chinese Confucianist and Chinese Communist party values that prepare the children of the new globalised elite with an internationally flavoured education and, for want of a better term, a 'double dose' of ideological education which will stand them in good stead in the event of them leaving China for tertiary education or employment. The need for Chinese internationalised schools to instil values consistent with 'cosmopolitan-nationalism' (Wright et al., 2021) that neither veer from Chinese political or societal thought nor engage in the creation of new identities (Wright & Lee, 2019) means that the societal positioning of disabled people attending these schools, the extent to which they are entitled to a voice in matters pertaining to them, and overall attitudes towards them are reaffirmed. Nor do Chinese internationalised schools operate under the guise of inclusion or acceptance that may be more subtly employed in Chinese public schools where those enrolled are less likely to be leaving China. Indeed, teacher participant responses made reference to the concepts of bringing pride to China and of exporting Chinese talent abroad in the future. In ensuring that these 'cosmopolitan-nationalist' (Wright et al., 2021) students are imbued with the 'correct' Chinese communist and Chinese Confucianist values, it makes sense that official directives concerning the acknowledgement, encouragement, or promotion of the disabled (autistic) voice would not be implemented as assiduously in Chinese internationalised schools lest potential future ambassadors for China get the 'wrong idea'.

Related to the idea that ableist policies are pursued more aggressively and openly in Chinese internationalised schools owing to the threat of 'tension between globalist and nationalist forces' (Wright et al., 2021) is the suggestion from the findings of this research that autistic student participants had internalised the fact that they were deprived of a voice within their schools. Campbell (2008, 2009) posits that the internalisation of ableism on the part of disabled people arises from 'the distancing of disabled people from each other and the emulation by disabled people of ableist norms' (2008, p. 155). Chinese internationalised schools that do not actively include disabled people but do encourage disabled 'assimilation' into the norm could, therefore, be responsible for autistic participants accepting that they do not have a voice and even using what voice they do have to agree to the negative perceptions of them put forward by their teachers, as was the case in conversations with me during the course of this research. Moreover, the reality of being an autistic student enrolled in a school in which the autistic voice is not heard has the potential to create the damaging state of passing (Libsack et al., 2021), which involves a disabled individual adopting an accepted norm or ideal, along with the potentially devastating consequences of loss of self, burnout, and a negative self-image (Ahmed, 2017; Campbell, 2009; Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2022). It could explain why autistic student participants, recognising that they did not have a voice in matters pertaining to their education, made comments about ‘giving up’ or being ‘defeated’, still attempting to live up to the ableist expectations and ideals established and propagated by their schools and teachers. In the case of this research, autistic student ‘failure’ to pass as neurotypical in a school system that only allows for the ‘survival’ of neurotypical students came at a predicted and, so called, ‘great cost’ (Ahmed, 2017) that manifested as a lack of a voice in matters pertaining to education, internalised ableist views directed towards self, and a feeling of hopelessness and defeat that permeated every interview I conducted with the autistic student participants.

In discussing the finding of a lack of disabled (autistic) voice, one must also consider the likely effect if a disabled voice were to exist within Chinese internationalised schools. Whilst the political and philosophical underpinnings of these schools may cause them to reinforce more extreme ableist narratives than their public-school counterparts and disseminate these views to all their students, including those with autism, would a clamour for the presence of autistic voices change practices and policies within these schools? In order to answer this hypothetical question, we must turn once again to the structure within which Chinese internationalised schools operate. As an issue of politics and power, it is likely that, even if disabled (autistic) voices were to be listened to, nothing would change owing to the fact that nothing *can* change within the existing system. Both teacher and autistic student participants made reference to the continuation of policies and practices because for better (from the teacher participants’ perspective) or for worse (from the perspective of autistic student participants) they are what those working or enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools are used to and have come to expect. These views directly tie in with research which concerned educational reform from the re-opening of China in the late 1970s to the state of Chinese education in 2020. Whilst grassroots movements that promote educational change have gradually been encouraged, any change must be in line with government desires and recommendations (Wang & Yang, 2020) and any pressure for change remains tightly controlled. It is no surprise, therefore, that this investigation into the lack of a disabled (autistic) voice in Chinese internationalised schools reveals an inflexible system that propagates ableist assumptions and views and encourages those damaged by such assumptions to internalise these beliefs, thereby contributing to a cycle of despair such as was felt when broaching the subject of ‘what if it were different?’ during chapter 5 of this thesis.

6.3: Discussing Power, Politics, Society, and China

In discussing the reiteration of normality and the absence of a disabled (autistic) voice within Chinese internationalised schools, this chapter has addressed the two themes that permeated through the findings chapter, how those themes can be understood and explained by drawing upon relevant literature, and how they serve as disempowering elements from the perspective of a critical disability theory approach. It is important, however, to ensure that this discussion is not dismissed as being too simplistic in blaming the policies of the Chinese Communist Party or the position of Confucianism as a societal 'glue' for the fact that Chinese internationalised schools cannot offer autistic students a socially just education. Whilst these factors do contribute to this outcome, they also exist as an integral and inseparable part of the modern-day nation of China which owes its unique socio-political system and beliefs to thousands of years of development. Avoiding mention of this issue invites criticism and claims of oversimplification and the reiteration of the belief held by many Chinese people that Chinese society is simply too complex to be understood (Gamble, 2000; Shambaugh, 2008). Chinese internationalised schools cannot provide autistic students with a more socially just education because there is no mechanism for them to be accepted within the society they inhabit. They are powerless because they are not valued by society and because the thought underpinning society is a Chinese Communist Party interpretation of socialism and Confucianism which only positions particular individuals as powerful.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to investigate the extent to which the burgeoning number of Chinese internationalised schools were capable of providing autistic students with a more 'socially just' education. The concept of social justice in this instance has been extrapolated from Critical Disability Theory and applied to the field of educational institutions in China. The research also sought to include the voices of autistic students. Whilst not a research purpose *per se*, the inclusion of autistic voices was essential in the research design and cannot be understated in its importance. A qualitive, interpretative phenomenological approach was adopted for this study as this position is concerned with identifying and understanding people's perceptions of the world and the context or situation that they find themselves in (Teherani et al., 2015). Moreover, the fact that interpretative phenomenology adheres to critical theory (Teherani et al., 2015; Procyshyn, 2020) allowed the Critical Disability Theory framework underpinning this thesis to be woven throughout the research and writing processes. Interpretative phenomenology allowed the research to be undertaken from the point of view and the experiences of those involved in the area of education under investigation. Allowing for a phenomenon to be investigated from the point of view of those who experience it (Teherani et al., 2015) provided the opportunity to understand more thoroughly the perspectives of autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools and of teachers who work in them, thereby discovering the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools are capable of providing autistic students with a more socially just education.

This thesis makes an original contribution to a number of fields including autism education in China, the field of critical disability studies, and the still developing concept of internationalised education in China. The importance of this thesis can be highlighted by drawing attention to the fact that little to no work has been conducted in China that directly involved autistic participants, despite a recognition of the need to meaningfully include autistic people in research (Cascio et al., 2020; Pellicano et al., 2022). Furthermore, the majority of autism research in China has been of an aetiological nature. Very little research that has been conducted previously has been with the purpose of 'bettering' the education of autistic students, nor has it been undertaken within the context of Chinese internationalised education which, in itself, is considered an under-investigated area. Along with theorising *why* Chinese internationalised schools are incapable of offering autistic students a more socially just education, this thesis is, to my knowledge, the first of its kind to utilise Critical Disability Theory as an evaluative tool in order to uncover the capacity of a Chinese societal institution to promote disability existence, rights, access, and inclusion. This thesis also paves the way for greater theorisation as to how autistic education should be 'done' in China. Finally, an unintended consequence of the fact that this is research conducted by an autistic researcher working with autistic participants could be that future ethical debates on the question of autistic people conducting autism research may benefit from the approaches and perspectives spoken about throughout this thesis.

7.1 Main Conclusions

7.1.1 The Reiteration of Normality in Chinese Internationalised Schools

My findings and subsequent discussion of those findings establish that the disempowering behaviour involved in a reiteration of normality is present, propagated, and internalised at Chinese internationalised schools. The reiteration of an ideal ‘norm’ and preference for neurotypical students was highlighted from participant interviews and conversations. Teacher participants actively adhered to the view that autistic students should learn to behave ‘normally’ when in school and that Chinese internationalised schools were not built for the success of autistic students, or even for their education at all. In their opinion, autistic students would be better served in public special schools that, as mentioned in chapter 2, autistic students are also often excluded from. When confronted with the reality that autistic students *are* enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools and, therefore, *should* be educated there, teacher participants continued to focus on the negatively perceived differences of autistic students from their neurotypical classmates. Of particular interest was the fact that autistic student participants had recognised and internalised the ethos of their schools where a ‘normal’ ideal was considered to be preferable and desired over the autistic reality. Autistic student participants made references to wanting to fit in with their peers, wanting to be like their peers to please their teachers, and wanting to adhere to the concept of ‘normal’ so that they would be afforded the opportunity to receive a quality education rather than suffering an existence in the classroom without meaningful engagement or purpose. In some instances, autistic student participants had even begun to attack their own autistic identities and internalise ableist perceptions and preconceptions of success, value, and legitimacy. References to wanting to be ‘normal’ drew these internalisations to the surface and highlighted the complex and damaging nature of a school system that questions autistic legitimacy and demands that autistic students do the same. Whilst it was apparent that the act of reiterating normality was considered by the teacher participants to be the correct approach to Chinese internationalised education, the reasons for this could not simply be attributed to a lack of understanding or education about autism specifically and disabilities in general. Evidence instead points towards the roles of Chinese Confucianist and Chinese communist thought in all areas of society, including education. The deeply ingrained nature of these ideologies, coupled with the top-down socio-political approach to educational policy in the People’s

Republic of China means that not only is the reiteration of normality encouraged, it is also a fundamental tenet of the Chinese education system that has been adopted by Chinese internationalised schools and will never change without a total reformation of treasured national philosophies and practices. Owing to the fact that Chinese Confucianist and Chinese communist philosophies are entrenched in the pedagogy of Chinese internationalised schools and the teachers who teach there, these schools, despite their surface level differences, have far more in common with Chinese public schools where the treatment of autistic students has been the subject of research which has outlined the existence of ableist policies and practices.

7.1.2 The Absence of a Disabled (Autistic) Voice In Chinese Internationalised Schools

The findings of my research revealed that disabled or, more specifically, autistic voices do not have a place within the confines of Chinese internationalised schools. Whilst initial analysis suggested that this may be due to the role of Chinese Confucianist and Chinese communist philosophies in the Chinese education system, further investigation revealed that this may not be the complete story. Although the reiteration of normality has, to all intents and purposes, been an official educational policy in China, excluding disabled voices has not. The official government line is one of the inclusion and promotion of disabled voices. My findings hypothesised that the outright failure to implement such a policy in Chinese internationalised schools that could be deemed as going against the party line stems from the fact that the ‘read between the lines’ approach to including disabled voices that is employed in Chinese public schools is too subtle a policy for Chinese internationalised schools and runs the risk, were it to be adopted in internationalised schools, of being exported worldwide as an ideology by those of the globalised elite who, after leaving these schools, go abroad to undertake work or tertiary education. My findings also identified a stifling of the autistic voice by the autistic students themselves due to the ideological pressure placed upon them by their schools due to their internationalised status. Furthermore, this research has suggested that autistic students in Chinese internationalised schools take on a neurotypical voice that either stays silent or engages in self-deprecation so as to survive a school system that refuses to acknowledge divergent voices or experiences. Finally, this thesis identified the role of teachers employed in Chinese internationalised schools in disallowing the autistic voice. Owing to the nature of these schools and their focus on ‘cosmopolitan-nationalism’ (Wright et al., 2021), it is arguable that teachers have been encouraged to espouse the ableist rhetoric that is found in Chinese society in general, and that the rhetoric has been amplified in these schools due to the perceived need of ensuring that the students receive a stronger injection of Chinese Confucianist and Chinese communist ideology to export worldwide. As a consequence of amplifying ableist agendas, the 'fear' of autistic voices is magnified, resulting in a teaching staff who are perhaps more vigilant in their determination to stifle those voices.

7.2 Limitations

Although this thesis makes an original and important contribution to research, no piece of work is perfect, and its limitations will be addressed in the following section.

7.2.1 Sampling and Diversity

Whilst it would be impossible to include all autistic students, all Chinese internationalised schools, and all teachers who teach at Chinese internationalised schools in any study, it would have been beneficial for this research to have had a more representative sample of female autistic student participants. Although existing research has long made reference to the gender disparity between males and females when it comes to an autism diagnosis (Rivet & Matson, 2011) and to the fact that autistic females are usually diagnosed with autism later in life than autistic males (Begeer et al., 2013; Leedham et al., 2020), a higher number of autistic females would have allowed for a more varied sample, and for additional valuable female insights to be considered. Similarly, although 20 Chinese internationalised schools were sampled, there are currently approximately 700 Chinese internationalised schools across the nation (Poole, 2019), with certain international hotspots such as Shanghai and Shenzhen containing 194 and 103 of the schools respectively (Keeling 2019). For a first investigation into autism within Chinese internationalised schools, this sample size of 20 is satisfactory, but it would be advantageous in future research to sample a greater number of schools in order to obtain a more complete picture and a clearer understanding of the phenomena investigated in this thesis.

7.2.2 Nascent Investigations and Research Scope

As this research was investigating an under-researched population operating within the context of an under-researched area of education, utilising methods and theoretical underpinnings that had not previously been used in research in China, it could be suggested that it was overly ambitious in its scope. Whilst my defence would be that a simultaneous investigation into all these areas was the only possible way of understanding the experiences of a specific autistic community within a specific type of societal institution, I do concede that the sheer amount of work involved could lead to there being a greater possibility of important factors being overlooked than if each of these areas had been investigated individually. Whilst more generalised studies are often conducted for the purposes of a PhD thesis, more targeted and specific work benefits from being able to inform research and contribute to knowledge whilst avoiding the risk of becoming unmanageable. The risk posed by an overly ambitious thesis could exacerbate the pitfalls that can come with doctoral studies which often mark a researcher's first foray into the world of academia.

7.3 Recommendations and Implications for Future Research and Practice

The purpose of this research was to investigate the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools were capable of providing a more socially just education to autistic students. Whilst the findings have indicated that they are not capable of providing a socially just education such as would be understood through the lens of critical disability theory, that does not mean that valuable information cannot still be gleaned. This section will indicate how the direction of future research, future policies, and future practice could be informed by taking on board the issues discussed, and conclusions reached in this thesis.

7.3.1 Implications for Autism Research in China

This study was comprehensive in its scope and was the first of its kind to conduct research pertaining to the lives, experiences, and needs of autistic students enrolled in Chinese internationalised schools. Furthermore, it was the first to utilise critical disability theory as an evaluative framework in the Chinese context and the first to take an autism-centric approach by including the voices of autistic teenagers as participants. During the literature review, attention was drawn to the aetiological approach of previous autism studies in China and to the fact that autism research in China had been conducted *on* autistic people rather than *with* them. As there has been a growing movement worldwide for the inclusion of autistic people in research (Pellicano et al., 2022), and a shift in attitude towards the purpose of autism research from finding a cure to promoting societal inclusion (O'Reilly et al., 2020; Pukki et al., 2022), it would be hugely beneficial if this change were to be adopted in China owing to the sheer number of autistic people believed to live in the country, and to the positive impact that an attitudinal shift towards autism could have for the positioning of autistic people in Chinese society. From this perspective, this thesis serves as proof that it is possible to change the narrative around the purpose of autism research in China and that valuable insights can be gained by collaborating with autistic people rather than experimenting on them. From a moral standpoint, this thesis can hopefully serve as an exemplar of how to conduct research with autistic people, particularly in light of the fact that pre-existing autism research in China has excluded autistic people and has been lacking in respect for and tolerance of them.

7.3.2 Implications for Chinese Educational Policy

As has been revealed in this thesis, an educational policy that has its roots in Chinese Confucianist and Chinese communist philosophies is neither supportive nor inclusive of non-conventional learners such as autistic people. Whilst it may be highly unlikely to happen considering the extent to which Chinese Confucianism and Chinese communism are ingrained in Chinese society, this thesis would argue that steps should be taken to reform or even replace the philosophical underpinnings of Chinese internationalised schools specifically and the Chinese education system in general in order that they might move towards more inclusive philosophies that include and value the disabled, including autistic people, both in school and in Chinese society as a whole. Putting aside the obvious position of moral correctness, research has suggested that promoting a schooling system that benefits autistic people has the potential to allow autistic people to contribute to the economy and society by becoming functional members who are respected and valued rather than excluded, treated with pity, and ignored (Beghin, 2021; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Research has highlighted the fact that a diverse population has a greater impact on innovation, originality, and creativity than a homogenous one (Deckert & Schomaker, 2022; Gelfand, 2018). This, in turn, could promote further change in China resulting, in accordance with the wishes of the Chinese Communist Party, in a more harmonious society (Chen, 2021) that is both more tolerant and more respectful of the differences that make us human. Whilst this is beyond the full scope of this thesis, reference to a diverse population does bring to mind the struggles of various ‘othered’ groups such as the LGBTQ+ community within China that future research may also find could benefit from a reconceptualization of the Chinese education system.

7.3.3 Implications for Autistic People

From my position as an autistic researcher, I hope it is obvious that all research conducted with autistic participants has real world implications on their lives, their experiences, and their very existence. This research has contributed to the debate surrounding the concepts of autistic people conducting research and of autistic people being involved in research, not just in China and within the context of Chinese internationalised schools, but on an international level as well. Following the research methodologies and positionalities put forward by this thesis, I suggest that future research concerned with autism should be designed, conducted, and led by autistic people. As the people who have the most to gain, or lose, from autism research, autistic people should and must continue to use their voices to influence the direction that autism research is taking. Whilst movement towards this goal may not be achieved at a uniform rate owing to current approaches to autism research that differ from country to country and society to society, this thesis has shown that autism-led, and autism-informed research is both possible and valuable. We must move away from a situation where autistic people are simply regarded as a subject matter to be studied.

To that end, this thesis is in the unique position of having been able to truly document the experiences and voices of autistic people in a manner that captures their authentic autistic selves. This result is particularly important for two reasons. The first is that this thesis positions itself as an exemplar for working with autistic people in uncovering autistic experiences in a pre-reflective and organic manner. The second is that, not in a manner dissimilar from a case study, this thesis has been able to highlight in detail ten autistic voices who have informed this research and could, with appropriate care, respect, and consideration further inform research in the future. These autistic voices are inherently powerful, and it is not inconceivable that their words will exist as artefacts in pieces of research highlighting the importance of autistic voices in the future. It is perfectly possible that the words of Alexander, for example, go on to be included in or even inspire additional research and activism. In fact, owing to the specificity of this thesis and the powerful nature of participant responses, one hopes that this thesis as a whole and participant responses in particular be used as a research resource for autism research to come. On a final note, autism research led by and involving autistic people allows genuine autistic voices to contribute to society and to promote societal change that will be of benefit to them. Put simply, this research will hopefully add another voice to the oft cited rallying cry of ‘nothing about us, without us’ (Charlton, 2006).

7.4 In Closing

This thesis began by highlighting the gaps in research concerning the extent to which Chinese internationalised schools were capable of providing autistic students with a more socially just education. As a nascent investigation into an under-studied area, the value of this research lies in its ability to uncover the ‘truth’ about the phenomenon of Chinese internationalised schools from a position that includes, values, and promotes the autistic experience within them. In keeping with an interpretative phenomenological position that allows for a phenomenon to be investigated from the point of view of those who experience it (Teherani et al., 2015), and adopting the lens of Critical Disability Theory that is capable of identifying, exposing, and analysing structures in place that disempower disabled people and contribute to the continued dominance of the ‘abled’ elite (Davis, 2010), this thesis has been able to expose the socially unjust nature of the education delivered in Chinese internationalised schools that have drawn in autistic students with promises of providing a safe haven for non-traditional learners (Young, 2018). In amplifying autistic voices and exposing the existence and promotion of ableism within these schools, it is both hoped and believed that this thesis has offered an insight into a previously neglected area through the accounts of autistic student participants and their teachers, and through the lens of critical disability theory, without which it would not have been possible to expose the inability of Chinese internationalised schools to provide autistic students with a more socially just education. Despite the somewhat pessimistic findings of this research, this thesis emphasizes the notion of the ‘optimism of the will’ that Gramsci believed was essential in working towards more just and equitable societal institutions (Sultana, 2014).

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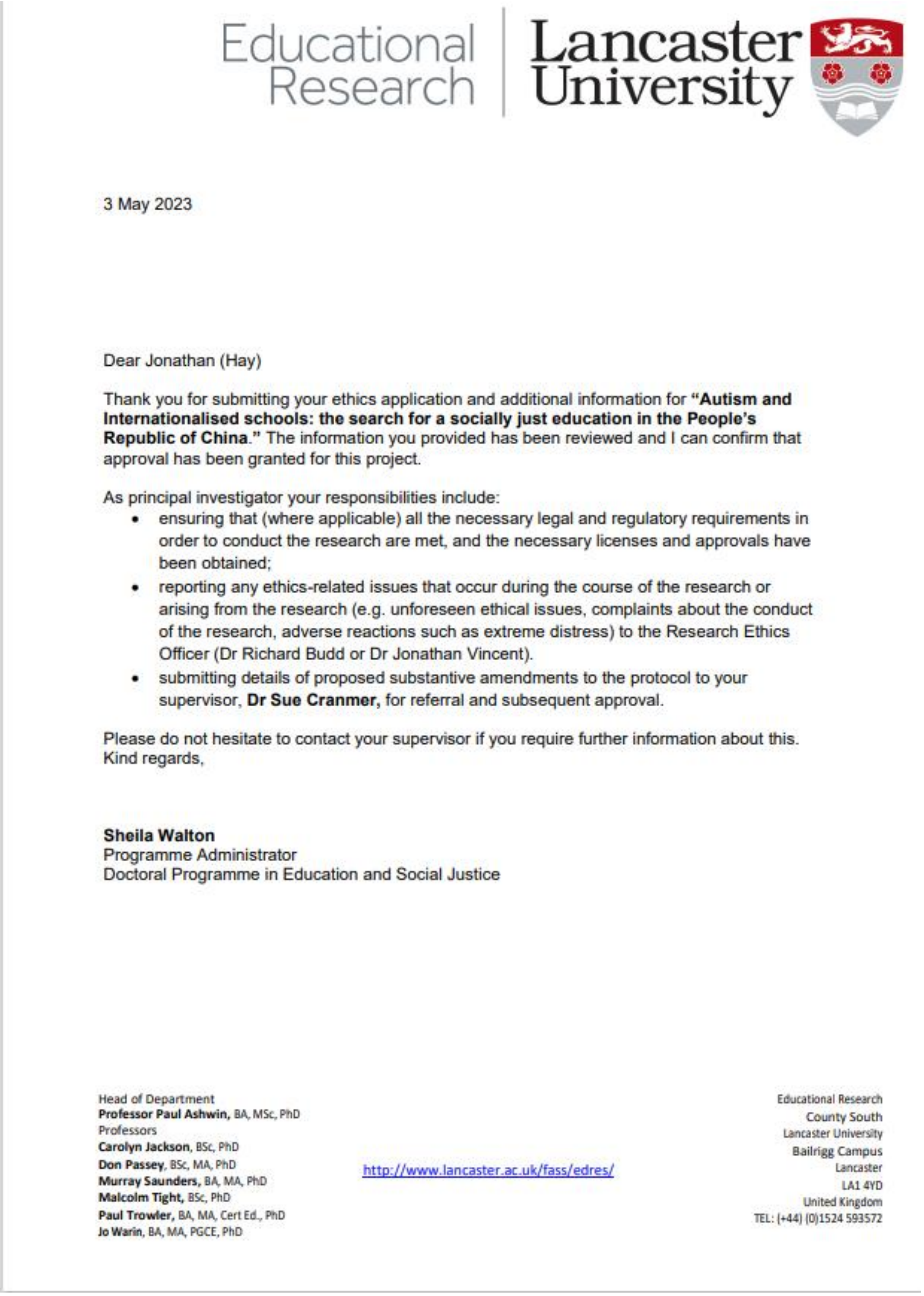
Appendices



Educational Research | Lancaster University

3 May 2023

Dear Jonathan (Hay)

Thank you for submitting your ethics application and additional information for **"Autism and Internationalised schools: the search for a socially just education in the People's Republic of China**." The information you provided has been reviewed and I can confirm that approval has been granted for this project.

As principal investigator your responsibilities include:

- ensuring that (where applicable) all the necessary legal and regulatory requirements in order to conduct the research are met, and the necessary licenses and approvals have been obtained;
- reporting any ethics-related issues that occur during the course of the research or arising from the research (e.g. unforeseen ethical issues, complaints about the conduct of the research, adverse reactions such as extreme distress) to the Research Ethics Officer (Dr Richard Budd or Dr Jonathan Vincent).
- submitting details of proposed substantive amendments to the protocol to your supervisor, **Dr Sue Cranmer,** for referral and subsequent approval.

Please do not hesitate to contact your supervisor if you require further information about this.
Kind regards,

Sheila Walton
Programme Administrator
Doctoral Programme in Education and Social Justice

Head of Department
Professor Paul Ashwin, BA, MSc, PhD
Professors
Carolyn Jackson, BSc, PhD
Don Passey, BSc, MA, PhD
Murray Saunders, BA, MA, PhD
Malcolm Tight, BSc, PhD
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Jo Warin, BA, MA, PGCE, PhD

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Appendix One – Ethical Approval

Appendix Two – *WeChat* Message Text for Student Participation

Hello,

My name is Jonathan Hay, and I am currently a PhD candidate at Lancaster University in the UK. My PhD thesis is concerned with the experiences of students (between the ages of 15-18) diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder who attend an internationalised school in China and teachers who teach at an internationalised school in China.

If you are:

A student diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder who attends an internationalised school in China,

I would love to hear more about your experiences and would like to invite you to take part in my PhD research project.

I have included participant information sheets below this message for your consideration.

If you have any questions or would like to take part in this research, please do email me at j.hay2@lancaster.ac.uk.

Best wishes,

Jonathan

Appendix Three – *WeChat* Message Text for Teacher Participation

Hello,

My name is Jonathan Hay, and I am currently a PhD candidate at Lancaster University in the UK. My PhD thesis is concerned with the experiences of students (between the ages of 15-18) diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder who attend an internationalised school in China and teachers who teach at an internationalised school in China.

If you are:

A teacher who teaches at an internationalised school in China,

I would love to hear more about your experiences and would like to invite you to take part in my PhD research project.

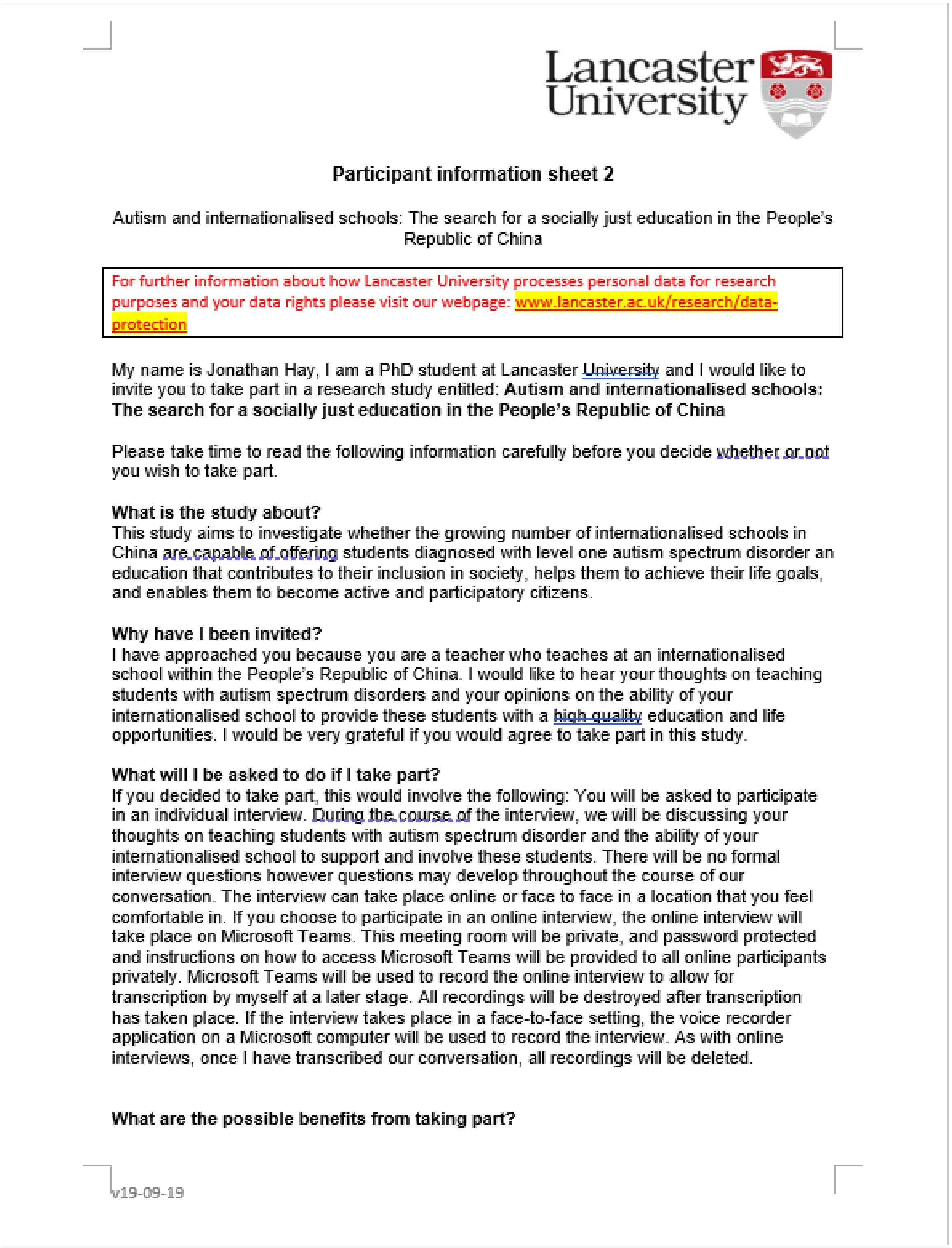
I have included participant information sheets below this message for your consideration.

If you have any questions or would like to take part in this research, please do email me at j.hay2@lancaster.ac.uk.

Best wishes,

Jonathan

Appendix Four – Teacher Participant Information Sheet



Lancaster
University

Participant information sheet 2

Autism and internationalised schools: The search for a socially just education in the People's Republic of China

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

My name is Jonathan Hay, I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study entitled: **Autism and internationalised schools: The search for a socially just education in the People's Republic of China**

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to investigate whether the growing number of internationalised schools in China are capable of offering students diagnosed with level one autism spectrum disorder an education that contributes to their inclusion in society, helps them to achieve their life goals, and enables them to become active and participatory citizens.

Why have I been invited?
I have approached you because you are a teacher who teaches at an internationalised school within the People's Republic of China. I would like to hear your thoughts on teaching students with autism spectrum disorders and your opinions on the ability of your internationalised school to provide these students with a high quality education and life opportunities. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decided to take part, this would involve the following: You will be asked to participate in an individual interview. During the course of the interview, we will be discussing your thoughts on teaching students with autism spectrum disorder and the ability of your internationalised school to support and involve these students. There will be no formal interview questions however questions may develop throughout the course of our conversation. The interview can take place online or face to face in a location that you feel comfortable in. If you choose to participate in an online interview, the online interview will take place on Microsoft Teams. This meeting room will be private, and password protected and instructions on how to access Microsoft Teams will be provided to all online participants privately. Microsoft Teams will be used to record the online interview to allow for transcription by myself at a later stage. All recordings will be destroyed after transcription has taken place. If the interview takes place in a face-to-face setting, the voice recorder application on a Microsoft computer will be used to record the interview. As with online interviews, once I have transcribed our conversation, all recordings will be deleted.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?

If you participate in this study, your insights could help advance research and allow us to understand how teachers view autistic students who attend internationalised schools in China and whether or not internationalised schools are capable of providing autistic students with a more socially just education. You may find potential benefit in being able to talk about your experiences.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study whether it be before, during, or after your interview. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after your interview has taken place.

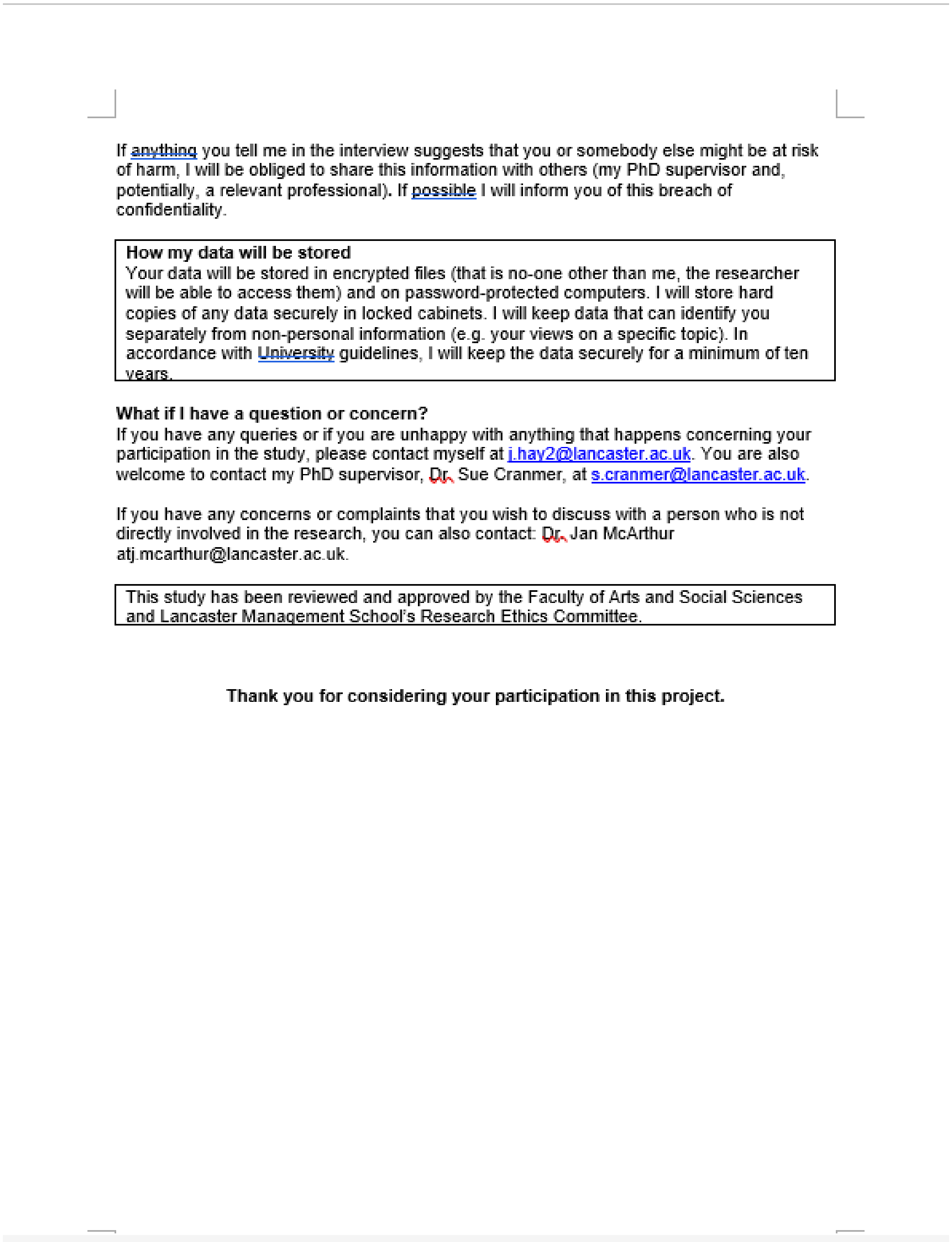
What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part although the interview/focus group process will last approximately 60 minutes which, depending on your schedule, may serve as a slight inconvenience. It may be the case that, for some participants, discussing experiences and views of autism could be regarded as a sensitive topic. If discussing your experiences and views of autism is likely to make you feel uncomfortable in any way, it is recommended that you do not take part in this piece of research.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview only I, the researcher conducting this study, will have access to the ideas you share with me. I may quote you in my thesis however the full transcribed interview will remain accessible only to myself. Audio recordings, once transcribed, will be deleted to further protect your identity.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. The only information that will be recorded will be your status as a teacher at an internationalised school, your level of education, your age and gender, and your number of years teaching.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes, so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in our publications.



If anything you tell me in the interview suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with others (my PhD supervisor and, potentially, a relevant professional). If possible I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

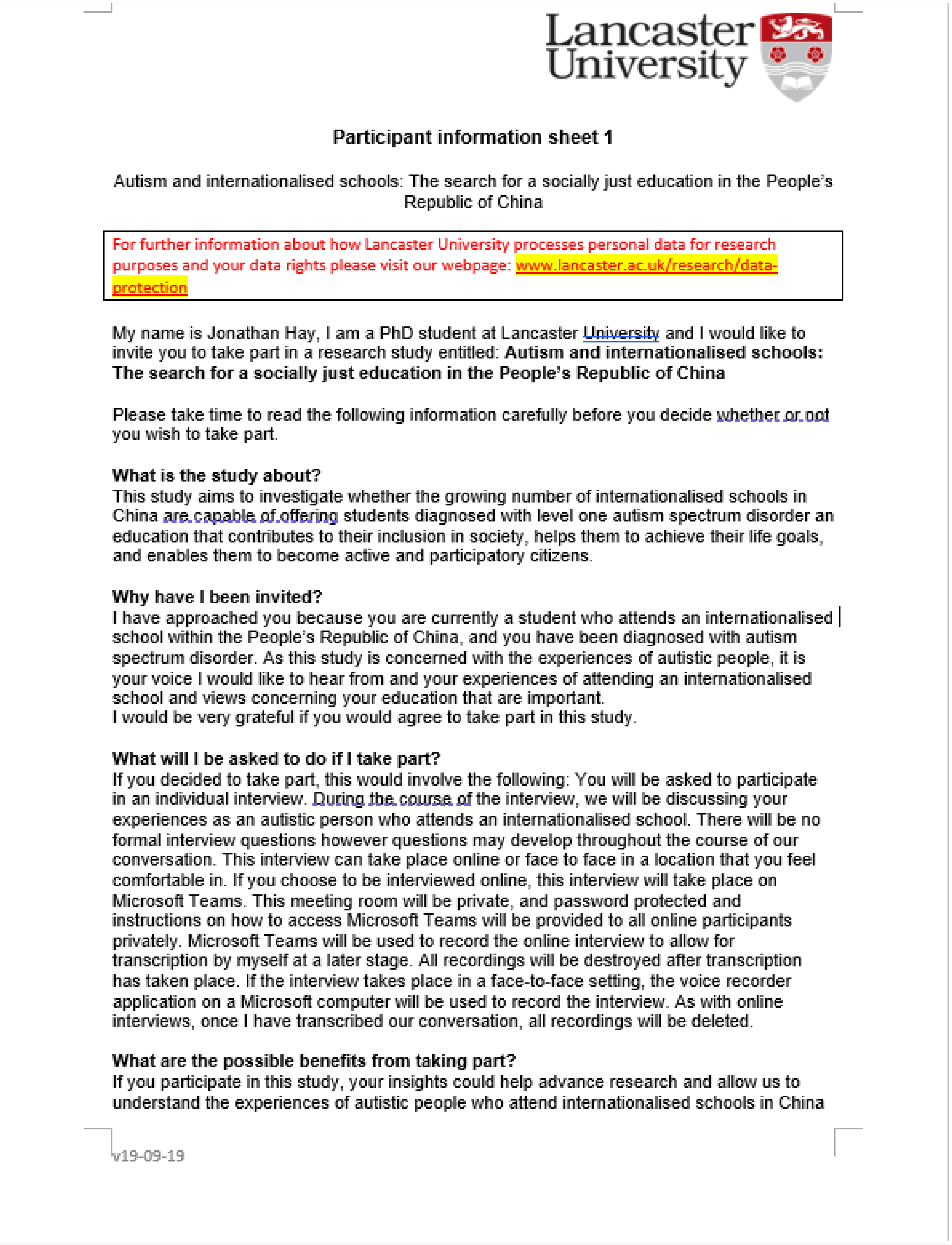
What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself at j.hay2@lancaster.ac.uk. You are also welcome to contact my PhD supervisor, Dr. Sue Cranmer, at s.cranmer@lancaster.ac.uk.

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact: Dr. Jan McArthur atj.mcarthur@lancaster.ac.uk.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

Appendix Five – Student Participant Information Sheet



Lancaster University

Participant information sheet 1

Autism and internationalised schools: The search for a socially just education in the People's Republic of China

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

My name is Jonathan Hay, I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study entitled: **Autism and internationalised schools: The search for a socially just education in the People's Republic of China**

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to investigate whether the growing number of internationalised schools in China are capable of offering students diagnosed with level one autism spectrum disorder an education that contributes to their inclusion in society, helps them to achieve their life goals, and enables them to become active and participatory citizens.

Why have I been invited?
I have approached you because you are currently a student who attends an internationalised school within the People's Republic of China, and you have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. As this study is concerned with the experiences of autistic people, it is your voice I would like to hear from and your experiences of attending an internationalised school and views concerning your education that are important.
I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decided to take part, this would involve the following: You will be asked to participate in an individual interview. During the course of the interview, we will be discussing your experiences as an autistic person who attends an internationalised school. There will be no formal interview questions however questions may develop throughout the course of our conversation. This interview can take place online or face to face in a location that you feel comfortable in. If you choose to be interviewed online, this interview will take place on Microsoft Teams. This meeting room will be private, and password protected and instructions on how to access Microsoft Teams will be provided to all online participants privately. Microsoft Teams will be used to record the online interview to allow for transcription by myself at a later stage. All recordings will be destroyed after transcription has taken place. If the interview takes place in a face-to-face setting, the voice recorder application on a Microsoft computer will be used to record the interview. As with online interviews, once I have transcribed our conversation, all recordings will be deleted.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
If you participate in this study, your insights could help advance research and allow us to understand the experiences of autistic people who attend internationalised schools in China

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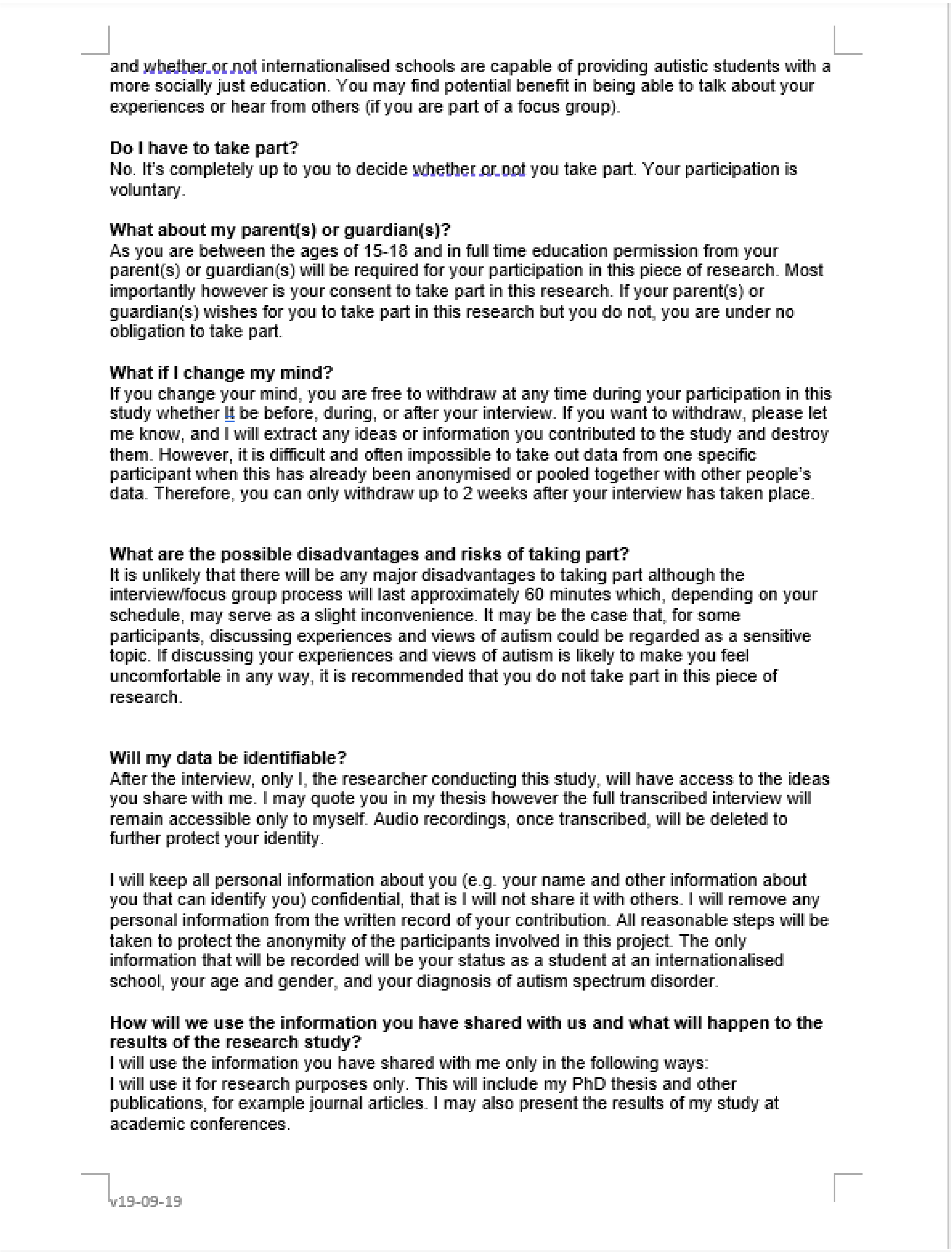


and whether or not internationalised schools are capable of providing autistic students with a more socially just education. You may find potential benefit in being able to talk about your experiences or hear from others (if you are part of a focus group).

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What about my parent(s) or guardian(s)?
As you are between the ages of 15-18 and in full time education permission from your parent(s) or guardian(s) will be required for your participation in this piece of research. Most importantly however is your consent to take part in this research. If your parent(s) or guardian(s) wishes for you to take part in this research but you do not, you are under no obligation to take part.

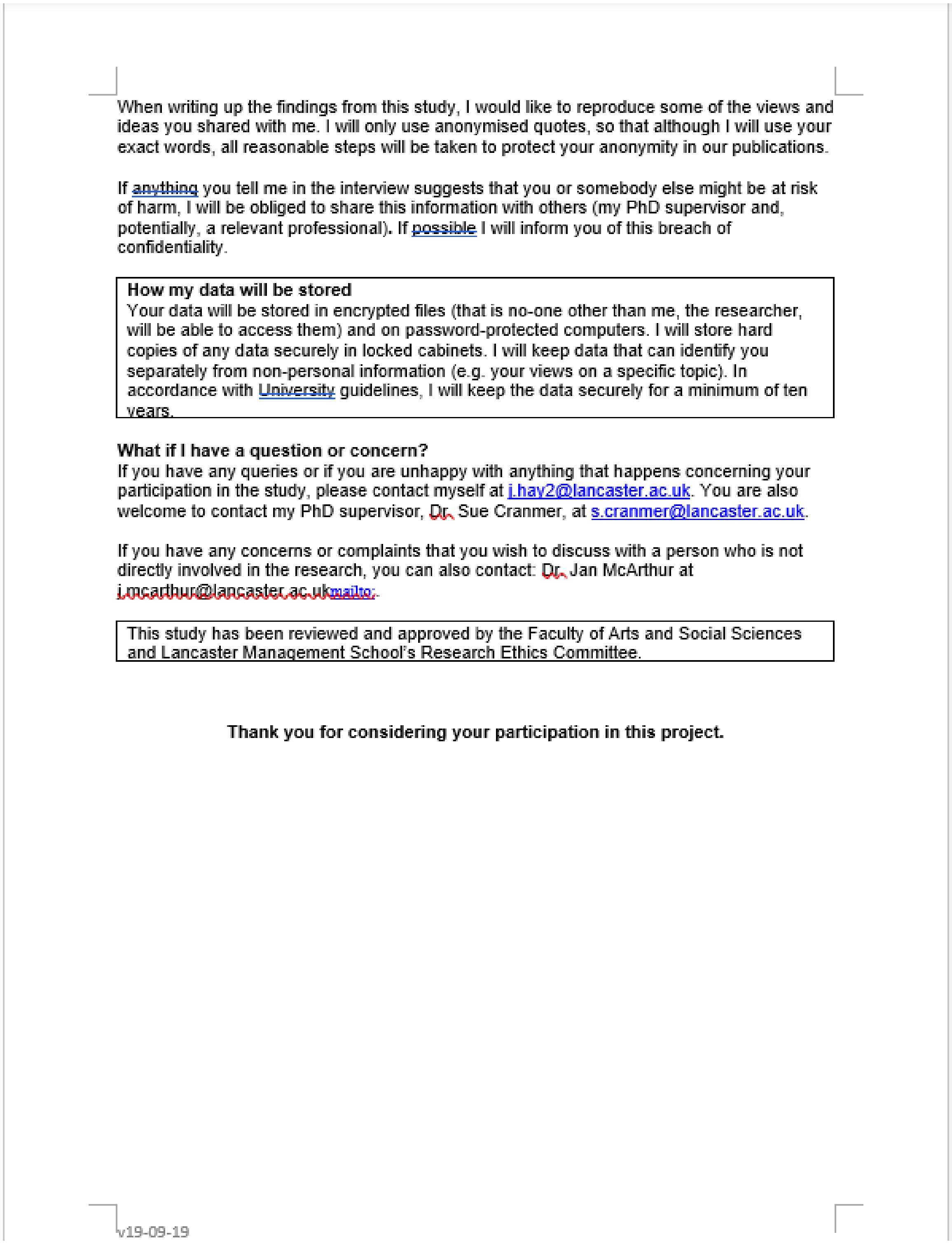
What if I change my mind?
If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study whether It be before, during, or after your interview. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after your interview has taken place.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part although the interview/focus group process will last approximately 60 minutes which, depending on your schedule, may serve as a slight inconvenience. It may be the case that, for some participants, discussing experiences and views of autism could be regarded as a sensitive topic. If discussing your experiences and views of autism is likely to make you feel uncomfortable in any way, it is recommended that you do not take part in this piece of research.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study, will have access to the ideas you share with me. I may quote you in my thesis however the full transcribed interview will remain accessible only to myself. Audio recordings, once transcribed, will be deleted to further protect your identity.

I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. The only information that will be recorded will be your status as a student at an internationalised school, your age and gender, and your diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences.



When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes, so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in our publications.

If anything you tell me in the interview suggests that you or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with others (my PhD supervisor and, potentially, a relevant professional). If possible I will inform you of this breach of confidentiality.

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher, will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself at j.hay2@lancaster.ac.uk. You are also welcome to contact my PhD supervisor, Dr. Sue Cranmer, at s.cranmer@lancaster.ac.uk.

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact: Dr. Jan McArthur at j.mcarthur@lancaster.ac.ukmailto:.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

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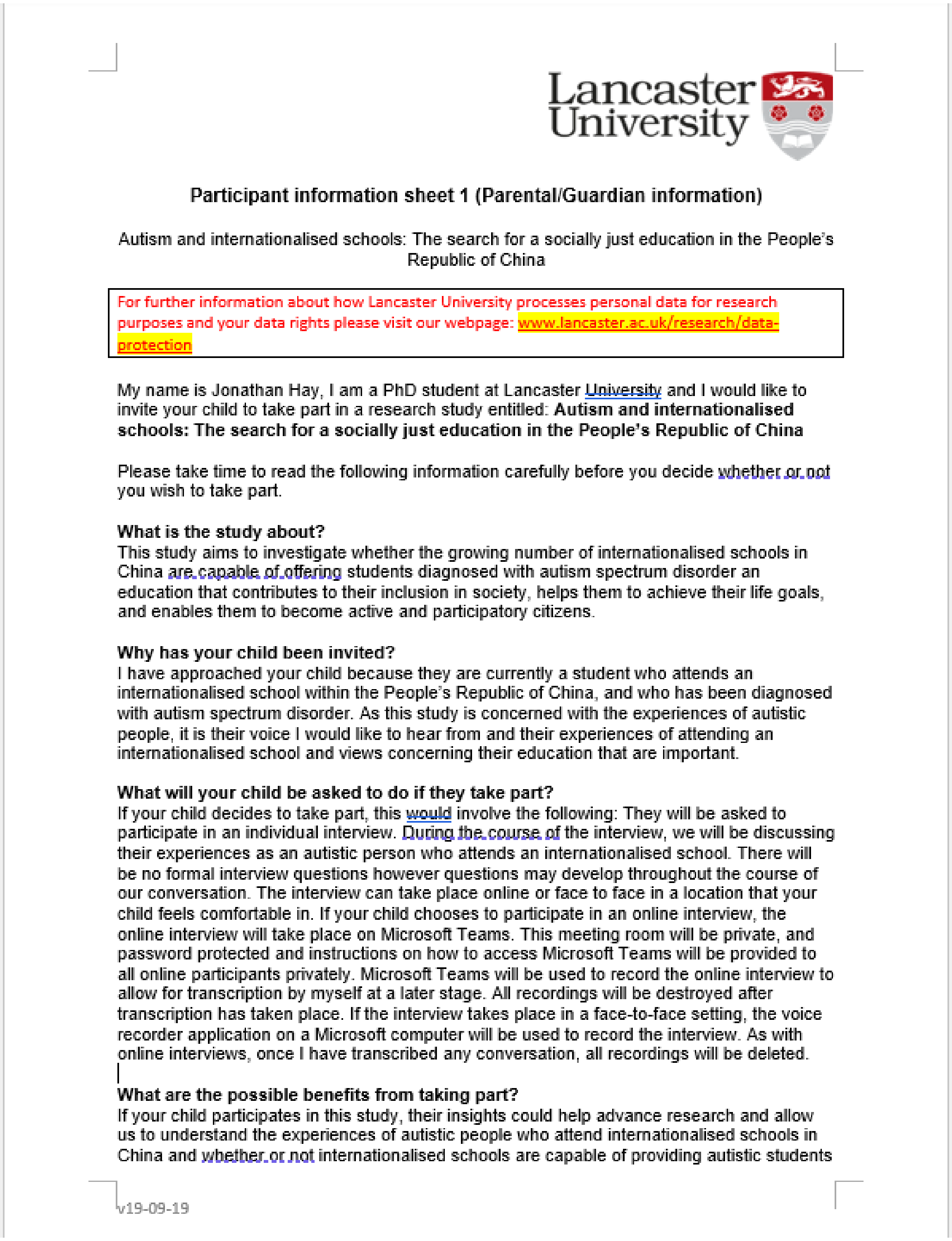
Appendix Six – Parent/Guardian of Student Participant Information Sheet



Lancaster University

Participant information sheet 1 (Parental/Guardian information)

Autism and internationalised schools: The search for a socially just education in the People's Republic of China

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

My name is Jonathan Hay, I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite your child to take part in a research study entitled: **Autism and internationalised schools: The search for a socially just education in the People's Republic of China**

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This study aims to investigate whether the growing number of internationalised schools in China are capable of offering students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder an education that contributes to their inclusion in society, helps them to achieve their life goals, and enables them to become active and participatory citizens.

Why has your child been invited?
I have approached your child because they are currently a student who attends an internationalised school within the People's Republic of China, and who has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. As this study is concerned with the experiences of autistic people, it is their voice I would like to hear from and their experiences of attending an internationalised school and views concerning their education that are important.

What will your child be asked to do if they take part?
If your child decides to take part, this would involve the following: They will be asked to participate in an individual interview. During the course of the interview, we will be discussing their experiences as an autistic person who attends an internationalised school. There will be no formal interview questions however questions may develop throughout the course of our conversation. The interview can take place online or face to face in a location that your child feels comfortable in. If your child chooses to participate in an online interview, the online interview will take place on Microsoft Teams. This meeting room will be private, and password protected and instructions on how to access Microsoft Teams will be provided to all online participants privately. Microsoft Teams will be used to record the online interview to allow for transcription by myself at a later stage. All recordings will be destroyed after transcription has taken place. If the interview takes place in a face-to-face setting, the voice recorder application on a Microsoft computer will be used to record the interview. As with online interviews, once I have transcribed any conversation, all recordings will be deleted.

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
If your child participates in this study, their insights could help advance research and allow us to understand the experiences of autistic people who attend internationalised schools in China and whether or not internationalised schools are capable of providing autistic students

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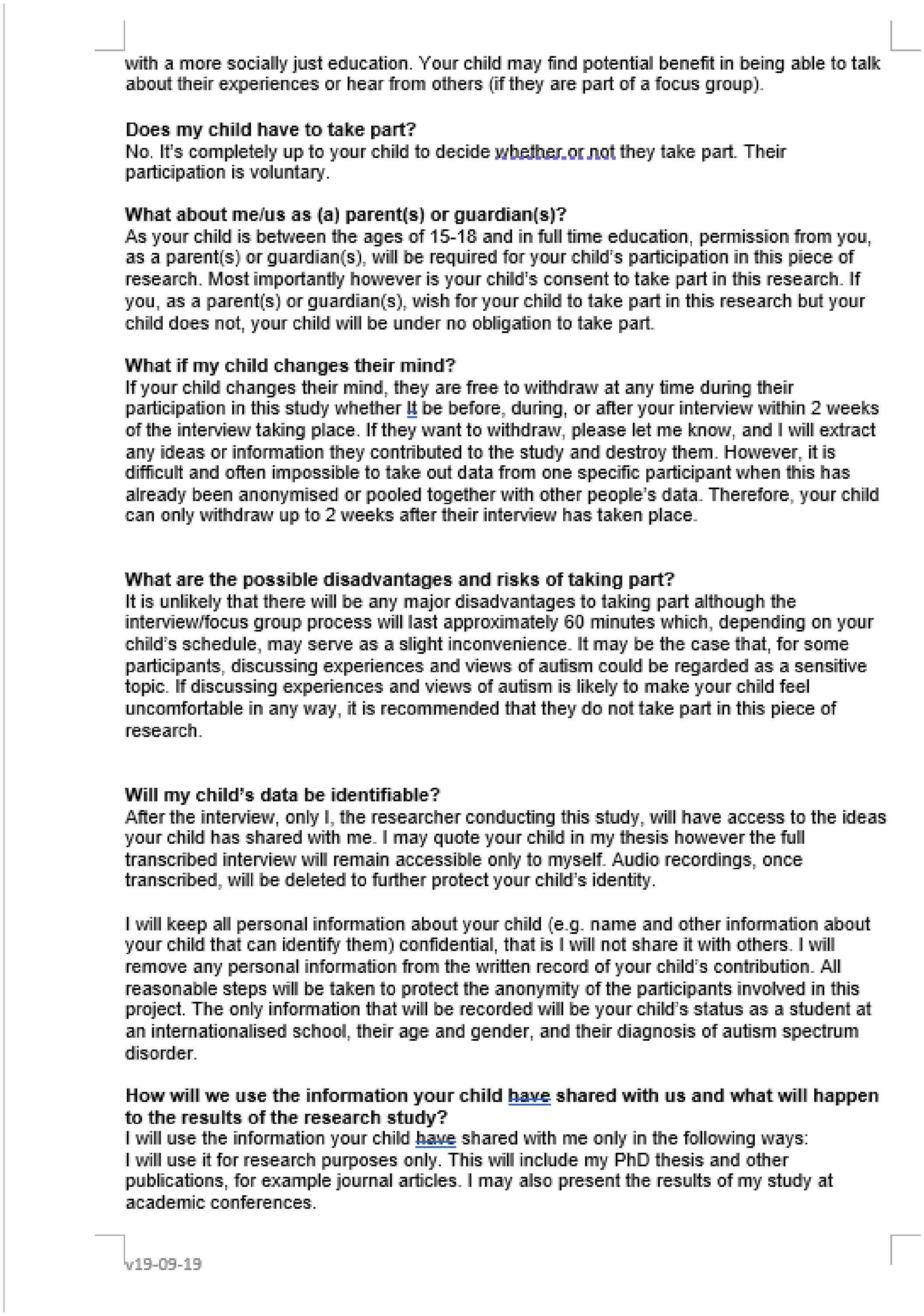


with a more socially just education. Your child may find potential benefit in being able to talk about their experiences or hear from others (if they are part of a focus group).

Does my child have to take part?
No. It's completely up to your child to decide whether or not they take part. Their participation is voluntary.

What about me/us as (a) parent(s) or guardian(s)?
As your child is between the ages of 15-18 and in full time education, permission from you, as a parent(s) or guardian(s), will be required for your child's participation in this piece of research. Most importantly however is your child's consent to take part in this research. If you, as a parent(s) or guardian(s), wish for your child to take part in this research but your child does not, your child will be under no obligation to take part.

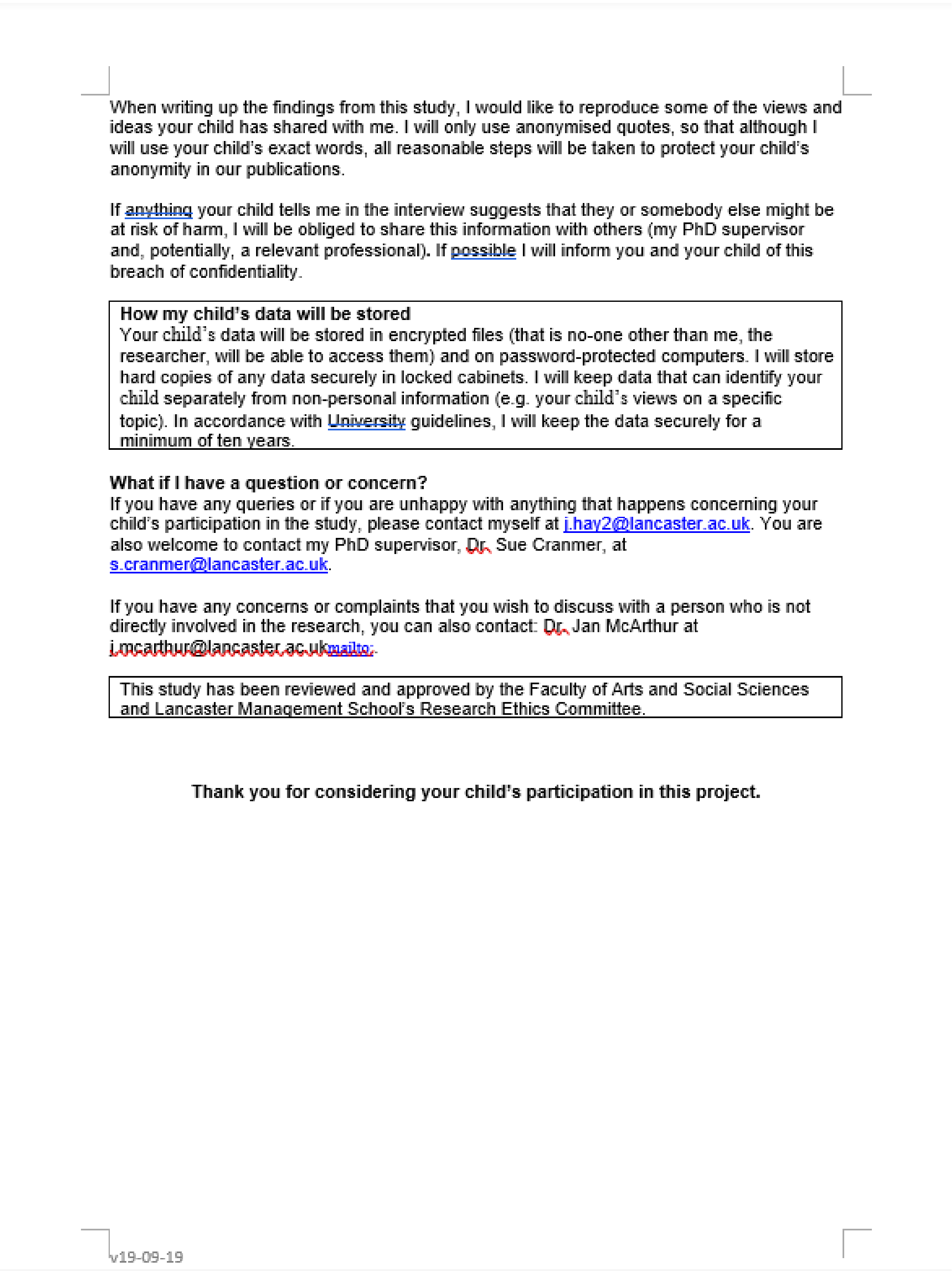
What if my child changes their mind?
If your child changes their mind, they are free to withdraw at any time during their participation in this study whether It be before, during, or after your interview within 2 weeks of the interview taking place. If they want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information they contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, your child can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after their interview has taken place.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part although the interview/focus group process will last approximately 60 minutes which, depending on your child's schedule, may serve as a slight inconvenience. It may be the case that, for some participants, discussing experiences and views of autism could be regarded as a sensitive topic. If discussing experiences and views of autism is likely to make your child feel uncomfortable in any way, it is recommended that they do not take part in this piece of research.

Will my child's data be identifiable?
After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study, will have access to the ideas your child has shared with me. I may quote your child in my thesis however the full transcribed interview will remain accessible only to myself. Audio recordings, once transcribed, will be deleted to further protect your child's identity.

I will keep all personal information about your child (e.g. name and other information about your child that can identify them) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your child's contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. The only information that will be recorded will be your child's status as a student at an internationalised school, their age and gender, and their diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder.

How will we use the information your child have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information your child have shared with me only in the following ways:
I will use it for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences.



When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas your child has shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes, so that although I will use your child's exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your child's anonymity in our publications.

If anything your child tells me in the interview suggests that they or somebody else might be at risk of harm, I will be obliged to share this information with others (my PhD supervisor and, potentially, a relevant professional). If possible I will inform you and your child of this breach of confidentiality.

How my child's data will be stored
Your child's data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher, will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets. I will keep data that can identify your child separately from non-personal information (e.g. your child's views on a specific topic). In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your child's participation in the study, please contact myself at j.hay2@lancaster.ac.uk. You are also welcome to contact my PhD supervisor, Dr. Sue Cranmer, at s.cranmer@lancaster.ac.uk.

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact: Dr. Jan McArthur at j.mcarthur@lancaster.ac.ukmailto:.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your child's participation in this project.

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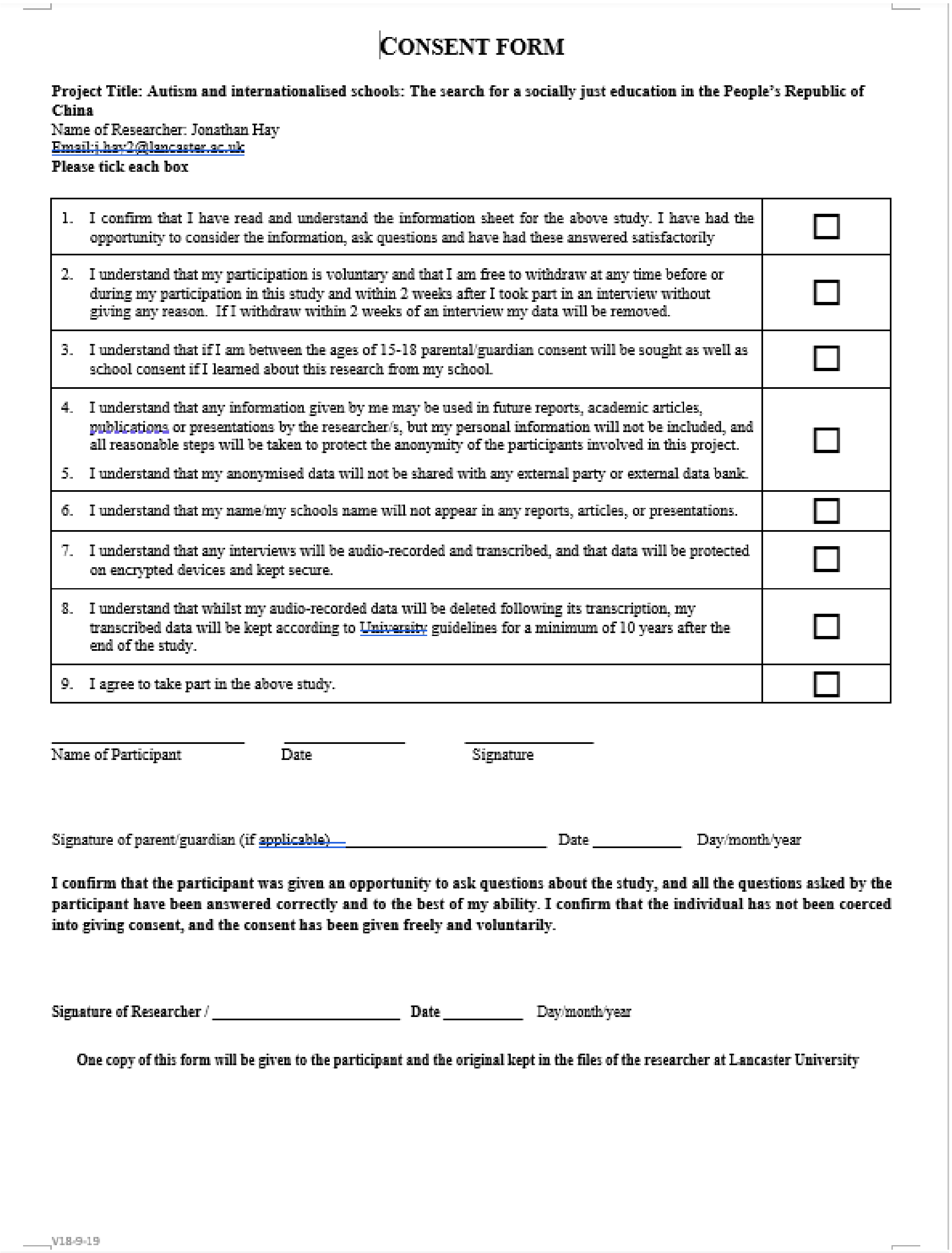
Appendix Seven – Participant Consent Form



CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Autism and internationalised schools: The search for a socially just education in the People's Republic of China
Name of Researcher: Jonathan Hay
Email:j.hay2@lancaster.ac.uk
Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before or during my participation in this study and within 2 weeks after I took part in an interview without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 2 weeks of an interview my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that if I am between the ages of 15-18 parental/guardian consent will be sought as well as school consent if I learned about this research from my school.	☐
4. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included, and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. 5. I understand that my anonymised data will not be shared with any external party or external data bank.	☐
6. I understand that my name/my schools name will not appear in any reports, articles, or presentations.	☐
7. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
8. I understand that whilst my audio-recorded data will be deleted following its transcription, my transcribed data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
9. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

________________________ ______________ ______________
Name of Participant Date Signature

Signature of parent/guardian (if applicable) ________________________ Date ___________ Day/month/year

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher / ________________________ **Date** __________ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

V18-9-19

Appendix Eight – Interview Questions Asked to Student Participants

My name is Jonathan Hay, I am a PhD student at Lancaster University, and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study entitled: **Autism and internationalised schools: The search for a socially just education in the People's Republic of China**. Today I just want to ask you some questions related to your experiences of being an autistic student who attends an internationalised (change internationalised depending on familiarity with other terms such as Chinese international or bilingual) school in China. Would that be okay?

The concept of valuing autism and/or being valued as an autistic student within Chinese internationalised schools

- So, let's start with a really common question, how do you find school? Is there anything you like or dislike? Anything you think could be better? Anything you think is really good?
- How do you feel being identified as autistic has impacted your time at school so far?
- So, I'm really interested in how autistic people, such as yourself, are viewed in school. How do you feel your school views you?
- How do you think your school supports your individual needs as an autistic student? Are there any specific supports or accommodations that you feel are missing or could be improved upon in your school?
- Do you feel that your teachers and staff members understand your strengths and challenges as an autistic student?
- Have you ever felt excluded or misunderstood by your classmates or peers? If so, can you provide examples and describe how it made you feel?

- How comfortable do you feel expressing your needs and to your teachers and Do you feel that your input is valued?
- Have you been involved in any decision-making processes related to your education (give examples if needed)? If so, can you describe those experiences and how they made you feel?
- Can you think of any instances where your school has gone above and beyond to make you feel valued and included?

The quality of education provided to autistic students and the extent to which this education can lead to meaningful opportunities

- How would you describe the educational opportunities and resources available to you in your school?
- How do you feel about your education being designed specifically to support autistic students like yourself? How is this similar or different to your school?
- In your opinion, how effectively does your school's curriculum take into account your strengths, challenges, and interests?
- Have you had opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, clubs, or projects that align with your interests and talents? Has this helped you in school?
- Have you received any guidance or support from your school in looking at what happens after you leave school?
- Do you think that your school has helped you become ready for what comes next?
- Are there any areas where you feel your school could improve its support and education to better help you after you finish at school?

- Overall, how confident are you that the education you are receiving at your school will help you achieve your dreams?

Difference and attitudes towards difference that exist within the school community

- How would you describe the overall attitude towards difference within your school?
- Have you personally experienced or observed instances of acceptance towards those with differences?
- Have there been any situations where you felt that differences were not appreciated or understood?
- How well do you think your teachers and classmates understand what autism is and what it's like to be autistic?
- Have you ever encountered any negative views of autism? How did this make you feel within your school?
- Can you describe any activities that your school does to help people understand and accept differences?
- How comfortable would you feel talking to your teachers and classmates about autism?
- Are there any changes or improvements you would like to see in your school to better support those with differences?
- How do you think your school's understanding of differences has impacted your education?

Closing

- Well, they are all the questions I have. Is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't discussed or anything that you'd like to bring up?
- Thank you so very much in taking part in this interview. Your responses will help us develop a better understanding of just how internationalised schools operate in supporting autistic students.

Appendix Nine – Interview Questions Asked to Staff Participants

My name is Jonathan Hay, I am a PhD student at Lancaster University, and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study entitled: **Autism and internationalised schools: The search for a socially just education in the People's Republic of China**. Today I just want to ask you some questions related to your experiences of being a teacher who works at an internationalised (change internationalised depending on familiarity with other terms such as Chinese international or bilingual) school in China and who may or may not have specifically taught autistic students. Would that be okay?

The concept of valuing autism and/or being valued as an autistic student within Chinese internationalised schools

- So, let's start with a really common question, how do you find working in an internationalised school? Is there anything you like or dislike? Anything you think could be better? Anything you think is really good?
- How do you feel working with autistic students could impact your time at school work?
- So, I'm really interested in how you as a teacher view autistic students (real or hypothetically) in your school

- How do you think your school supports the needs of autistic students? Are there any specific supports or accommodations that you feel are missing or could be improved upon in your school?
- Do you feel that you and your colleagues understand the strengths and challenges of autistic students?
- How comfortable would you feel working with autistic students. Would you feel that their input was important?
- Have you been involved in any decision-making processes related to the educational practices in your school?
- Can you think of any instances where your school has gone above and beyond to make students feel valued and included?

The quality of education provided to autistic students and the extent to which this education can lead to meaningful opportunities

- How would you describe the educational opportunities and resources available to autistic students in your school?
- How do you feel about your school's curriculum being designed specifically to support autistic students? How is this similar or different to now?
- In your opinion, how effectively does your school's curriculum take into account the needs of autistic people?
- Do autistic students have opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, clubs, or projects that align with their interests and talents?
- Do autistic students receive any guidance or support from your school in looking at what happens after school?

- Do you think that your school has helped autistic students become ready for what comes next?
- Are there any areas where you feel your school could improve its support and education to better help autistic students after they finish at school?
- Overall, how confident are you that the educational experience that your school provides will help autistic people in life?

Difference and attitudes towards difference that exist within the school community

- How would you describe the overall attitude towards difference within your school?
- Have you personally experienced or observed instances of acceptance towards those with differences?
- Have there been any situations where you felt that differences were not appreciated or understood?
- How well do you think you, your students, and your colleagues understand what autism is and what it’s like to be autistic?
- Have you ever encountered any negative views of autism? How do you feel about these views?
- How does your school work in promoting differences? Should your school promote differences?
- How comfortable would you feel talking to your students or colleagues about autism and autism education? Should there be discussions about this?
- Are there any changes or improvements you would like to see in your school to better support those with differences?

    - How do you think your school's understanding of differences has impacted your professional development?

Closing

- Well, they are all the questions I have. Is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't discussed or anything that you'd like to bring up?
- Thank you so very much in taking part in this interview. Your responses will help us develop a better understanding of just how internationalised schools operate in supporting autistic students.