



The peer interactions and school connectedness of high school girls on the autism spectrum

Dr Michelle Tso

Outline

1. Thesis project

- Background
- Method
- Participants

2. Findings

- Clear sense of self
- “Proper friendship”
- Challenges in social interactions
- School disconnectedness
- School connectedness

3. Implications for school connectedness

- Peer interactions
- Student-teacher relationships
- School setting





Increased complexity in peer interactions

(Jankowski et al., 2014;
MacPherson et al., 2016)



Importance of school connectedness

(Raniti et al., 2022;
Shochet et al., 2016)



Difficult experiences with peer interactions

(Cook et al., 2018;
Tierney et al., 2016)

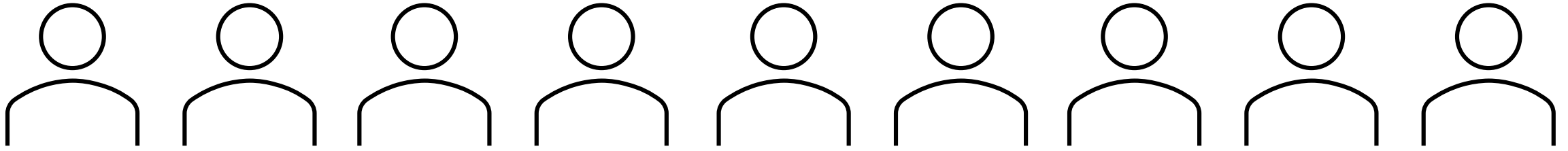
Aim: Develop an understanding of how high school girls on the autism spectrum experience peer interactions in school and how those experiences impact their sense of school connectedness



Various qualitative data collection methods



Advisory group



Hannah	Jenny	Bob	Savi	Monica	KBW	Jacinta	Margot	Carly
Year 7	Year 8	Year 8	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 10	Year 10	Year 12
Gov	Gov	Gov	Catholic	Gov	Gov	Gov	Gov	Indep
Co-Ed	Single Sex	Co-Ed	Co-Ed	Co-Ed	Co-Ed	Single Sex	Co-Ed	Co-Ed
Mainstream class	Support class	Mainstream class	Mainstream class	Support class	Support class	Mainstream class	Support class	Mainstream class
Anxiety	Anxiety	Anxiety	Not specified	Not specified	Anxiety	Anxiety	Anxiety	Not specified

Themes

1. Clear sense of self

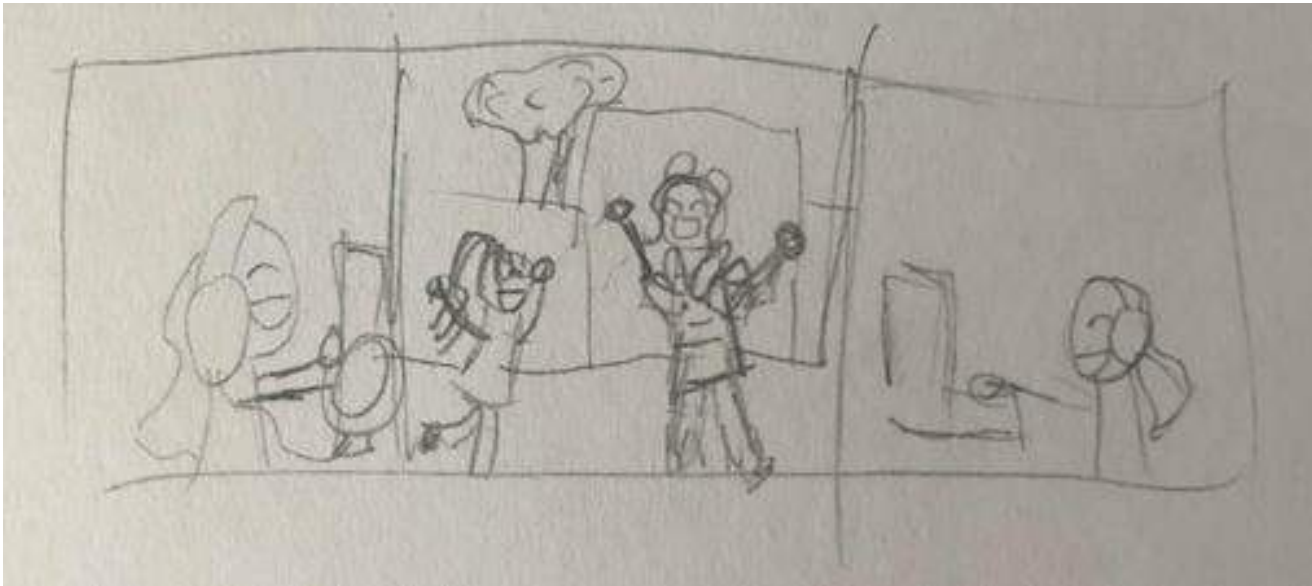
2. “Proper friendship”

3. Challenges in social interactions

4. School disconnectedness

5. School connectedness

1. Clear sense of self



Savi, Year 8

“[Pet] is like the batteries to my remote-control car. You can’t function without it”. **Bob, Year 8**

1. Clear sense of self

“No-one’s really going to listen to me, because I’m not always right, but I just kind of exist. No-one really cares that much, and they’re not going to listen to my opinions because I’m either just a kid or I’m saying something stupid for a grown woman now.”

Monica, Year 9



2. “Proper friendship”

“When night came around, because we were staying at the place, Jane had never stayed over somewhere, and so she wanted to go home ...I just stayed with her the whole time, and the teacher came up to me asking if I wanted to go to bed, and I said I wanted to stay with Jane ...”

Savi, Year 8



2. “Proper friendship”

“My friends are always the first thing I think about in the morning and always the last thing I think about when I go to sleep. So, they mean a lot to me”. **KBW, Year 10**

“We just kind of exist with things like, inside jokes, basically. A bunch of inside jokes is all I really need to survive ...” **Monica, Year 9**

2. “Proper friendship”

KBW, Year 10:

“I really don’t like meeting people IRL I have more online friends that I do offline friends.”

“Me and Zac vent to each other a lot so we know a lot of stuff about each other so ... we feel comfortable sharing with each other”



3. Challenges in social interactions

“I just talk to someone and I think, I want to be their friend, and what am I going to do about this, and then I start thinking ... it's too much work, and I'll just sort of drift away from them” **Margot, Year 10**

“I would just sort [the disagreement] out even if it wasn't my fault as well ...” **Hannah, Year 7**

3. Challenges in social interactions

“Like, in primary school, you could go up to someone and say, ‘Hey, can we be friends?’ That’s not how it works now”.

Jacinta, Year 9



3. Challenges in social interactions

“See, I always say this to people when they ask about this matter: if mainstream boys don’t like you, they’ll flip you off, and if you don’t get the message beyond that, they punch you in the face! It’s *fairly direct*. But girls will continue to toy with you, and won’t make their intentions clear, so you end up wasting a lot more time on their bullshit.”

KBW, Year 10

4. School disconnectedness

“Girls, we mask those symptoms and we only show those symptoms usually in the privacy of ourselves or our family” **Carly, Year 12**

“Whenever this one idiot teacher who I do not like, comes around, he’s so horrible, I can’t be myself ... he doesn’t really accept that I’m not (like) other kids” **Bob, Year 8**

4. School disconnectedness

“They think [having autism is] like a very, very strong disability, and they also make jokes about it ... There was, like, four boys that said to me, “Are you autistic?” I don’t know why, because I didn’t really do anything”

Hannah, Year 7



4. School disconnectedness

“Sometimes we get along and sometimes we don’t, and on the times that we don’t get along they’ll sort of want to be with other people, and sometimes I usually get left out ...” **Hannah, Year 7**

“I like working on my own because it is so fricking hard to teamwork!” **Margot, Year 10**

4. School disconnectedness

“One day this girl messaged me saying the whole group wanted me to leave the group, but it turned out she lied, and she wanted me to leave ... But she phrased it in a nice way, so I couldn't really say anything back to her”

Jacinta, Year 10



4. School disconnectedness

“... Because [teachers] are sometimes bullies.” **Jenny, Year 8**

“The bullying that happens in autism which a lot of teachers won't believe probably is psychological. Like do something like a sound or something you don't like with your sensitivities ... Teachers don't know how to react to that ...” **Carly, Year 12**

4. School disconnectedness

“... the lack of support ... the crowded environment and the lack of anything good, honestly!” **Monica, Year 9**

“No one cares about me.” **Jenny, Year 8**



5. School connectedness

“I prefer being with my friends the most.
Not really my classmates or the
teachers.” **Jacinta, Year 10**



5. School connectedness

“We kind of got into a bit of an argument. I found it actually really nice when she came up to me and she apologised to me ... I’d never actually had someone just apologise to me ...”

Monica, Year 9

5. School connectedness

“The music teacher is always really nice to us. Pretends that every class is his favourite class, so when it’s our turn to have it, he says we’re his favourite class, and stuff.”

Savi, Year 8



5. School connectedness

“Someone told me that someone was heading up the [games group], and I was just so excited for it. I waited for the first meeting of the group for ages, and when it came around, it did not disappoint at all.” **Margot, Year 10**

5. School connectedness

“Well, they respect my – teachers respect my sensitivities and the students sometimes do, so I guess that, and also, they changed it so I don’t have to come into school for every subject, only the subjects that are important, so I guess that.”

Carly, Year 12



Themes

Clear sense
of self



“Proper
friendship”



Challenges
in social
interactions



School
disconnectedness



School
connectedness



Implications

- Listen to what students on the autism spectrum share about their experiences



Peer interactions

- Challenge misconceptions about peer interactions
- “If they don’t have one of their good friends, they might have, like, an outburst or a panic attack and no-one will be able to calm them down.” **Bob, Year 8**



Peer interactions

- Recognise adolescence as being socially demanding

Resource: Planet Puberty



Keeping Friends



Making and keeping friends takes a lot of skills.

This can be hard for children to do.

For some children these skills come very naturally.

Other children might find it a little harder.

This is OK.

Peer interactions

- Understand gender related experiences like gender nonconformity
- Understand autism related experiences like masking

Resource: Autism Anti-Stigma Program



Peer interactions

- Offer sensitivity in response to generalised and social anxiety

Resource: Yellow Ladybugs



Peer interactions

- Provide social skills guidance and supports e.g. communication protocol or autistic peer support group

Resource: Girls Night Out Model



Student-teacher relationships

- “But I’d like to see in future a teacher treating autistic people the same as normal people, because they are normal people” **Bob, Year 8**
- Provide academic support



Student-teacher relationships

- Respond to incidents of bullying

Resource: What makes a good teacher?



Student-teacher relationships

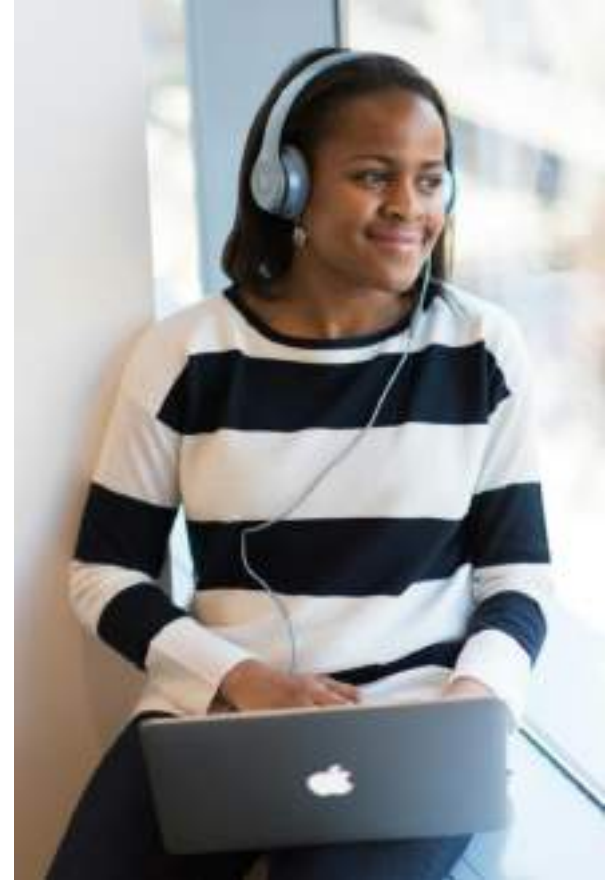
- Incorporate students' interests

Resource: Robotics Social Club



School setting

- Provide reasonable adjustments e.g. accommodating timetable or flexible classroom arrangements
- “They need more sensory tools in case someone gets sensory overload, because autistic kids get it a lot” **Bob, Year 8**



School setting

- Support transitions
- Provide a safe space

Resource: Amaze



“Well, there’s this really nice teacher that I’ve been struggling to go to sleep because they told me they were leaving, and she was really nice. She helped me cope with my autism and all the stress and anxiety of schoolwork and that. She encouraged me to keep going.”

Bob, Year 8



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