

# UNLOCKING INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY: LEARNING FROM CHILDREN'S INSIGHTS IN A SENIOR AUTISM CLASS

This study explores the experiences of six boys in a senior autism class in a suburban Irish primary school, focusing on their transitions from mainstream classrooms. Centring their voices through participatory creative workshops, the research uncovers how students perceive belonging, participation, and teaching approaches. Findings highlight the importance of sensory accommodations, flexible pedagogy, and authentic peer relationships. The novelty of this study lies in integrating autistic children's verbal and non-verbal contributions, such as LEGO® models, friendship chains, and ranking tasks, into the analysis, offering practical insights for teachers and policymakers. By embedding children's rights (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], Articles 2, 5, and 12) within inclusive pedagogy, the study demonstrates that meaningful participation by autistic students is essential for equity in Irish education.

**Keywords:** autistic student voice; special education; inclusive pedagogy; creative workshops; participatory research

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## INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is integral to fostering equity and diversity, particularly for neurodivergent learners. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE, 2024) stresses that inclusive practices must be tailored to autistic students. Yet, autistic children's own perspectives remain underrepresented in Irish educational discourse (Leonard and Smyth, 2022). This study addresses this gap by examining the experiences of six boys enrolled in a senior autism class. All participants began their schooling in mainstream classrooms prior to the establishment of the autism classes, and they now transition between the mainstream and autism settings. Through participatory creative workshops, the research amplifies autistic children's voices to inform more inclusive pedagogical practices (Morales, 2019).

## RATIONALE

This study adopts an interpretivist and transformative paradigm, recognising the socially constructed nature of inclusive practices and the ethical imperative of promoting social justice in research (Mertens, 2007, 2015). Participatory approaches have gained increasing prominence in autism research, shifting from research on autistic people to research with them (Zanuttini, 2023). Such methods are grounded in children's rights: Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989/2005) guarantees all children the right to express their views on matters affecting them; Article 2 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability; and Article 5 emphasises the role of guidance and support in enabling children's participation. This rights-based perspective highlights the ethical imperative of involving autistic children directly in shaping research and practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive pedagogy goes beyond accommodation to embrace collaborative and flexible teaching methods. It rejects ability-based grouping in favour of "multiple ways of being" (O'Brien, 2020, p.12). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a practical framework, encouraging flexibility in representation, action, and engagement (Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST], 2024). Despite its promise, barriers such as large classes, limited time, and scarce resources constrain implementation (Materechera, 2020). Professional development is therefore essential to build teacher confidence and competence (Ní Bhroin and King, 2020).

Student voice is a cornerstone of inclusive pedagogy. For autistic students, whose perspectives are often marginalised, enabling authentic expression is vital (Ne'eman, 2011). Participatory methods, including non-verbal approaches,

expand the range of communicative possibilities (Zanuttini, 2023; O’Keeffe and McNally, 2025). Positioning autistic children as co-constructors of knowledge challenges tokenistic inclusion and ensures practices align with their lived realities.

Ireland has made significant strides toward inclusion through legislation such as the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) and ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). However, the rapid growth of autism-specific classes raises concerns about isolation and limited reintegration into mainstream education (Travers, 2023). Effective leadership and whole-school planning remain critical to advancing inclusion (Rose and Shevlin, 2021).

This literature review demonstrates the urgent need to integrate autistic students’ voices into research and practice. By combining a children’s rights framework, participatory approaches, and an inclusive pedagogy lens, the current study contributes both theoretically and practically to the field. It offers insights not only into the educational experiences of autistic pupils but also into how schools and teachers can move toward more equitable and responsive practices.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm, recognising the socially constructed nature of inclusive practices (Merriam, 2002; Creswell, 2007). A qualitative design incorporating elements of Participatory Action Research (PAR) ensured students’ active involvement and authentic representation of their voices, including both verbal and non-verbal contributions (Milton et al., 2014; Morales, 2019; Stringer, 2019).

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval was obtained from University College Cork (UCC). Safeguards included tailored assent procedures (visual supports, simplified explanations), predictable routines, sensory breaks, and the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation and use of pseudonyms. Collaboration with teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) ensured accessibility and enriched data collection and analysis. A critical friend provided reflective oversight throughout the research process.

## PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

The research took place in a suburban Irish boys’ primary school with recently established autism classes. Six male students, aged 10–12, participated through purposive sampling (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Informed parental consent and student assent were secured. For confidentiality, participants are referred to using the code “P” followed by a number (e.g., P1, P2) when quoting or referencing their contributions.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Six creative workshops, designed around Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, were used to explore students’ experiences of participation, belonging, and pedagogy. The following multimodal activities were employed:

- **LEGO® Serious Play®** – a hands-on, constructivist method in which students used LEGO bricks to build 3D models representing their vision of an ideal classroom. This approach enabled metaphorical expression and facilitated deeper reflection and communication (McCusker, 2020; Simpson et al., 2002; DES, 2019; DE, 2022a).
- **Bean Pot Activity / Visual Preference Ranking (VPR)** – a structured sorting activity where children evaluated and ranked everyday school activities using cue cards to indicate their likes and dislikes. This provided an accessible and developmentally appropriate means of capturing pupil preferences (Goodhall, 2020).
- **Arts and Crafts (Friendship Chains)** – students created friendship chains as a hands-on arts activity, using visual and creative expression to prompt discussion and reflection on belonging and social connectedness (Kelchtermans, 2021; Wyse et al., 2021).
- **Facilitated Discussions (World Café)** – a structured small-group discussion method that employed themed tablemats as visual prompts to guide conversations about strengths and areas for improvement in creating an inclusive school. This method encouraged collaborative dialogue, idea sharing, and collective reflection (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Lohr et al., 2020; Brown, 2010).
- **Teacher-Spider Exercise** – a creative, participant-centred worksheet activity designed to explore students’ perceptions of ideal teacher qualities. Using multimedia stimuli and open-ended prompts, students

independently and collaboratively reflected on effective teaching behaviours, preferred teacher attributes, and approaches that foster positive learning environments, with visual representations capturing diverse perspectives (Bakx et al., 2015; Goodhall, 2020; Shankman, 1996; DE, 2022b).

- **Diamond Ranking (DR)** – a visual sorting technique in which students ranked images of school-related activities in a diamond-shaped layout to differentiate most- and least-preferred options (Dabel, 2006; Clark, 2012).

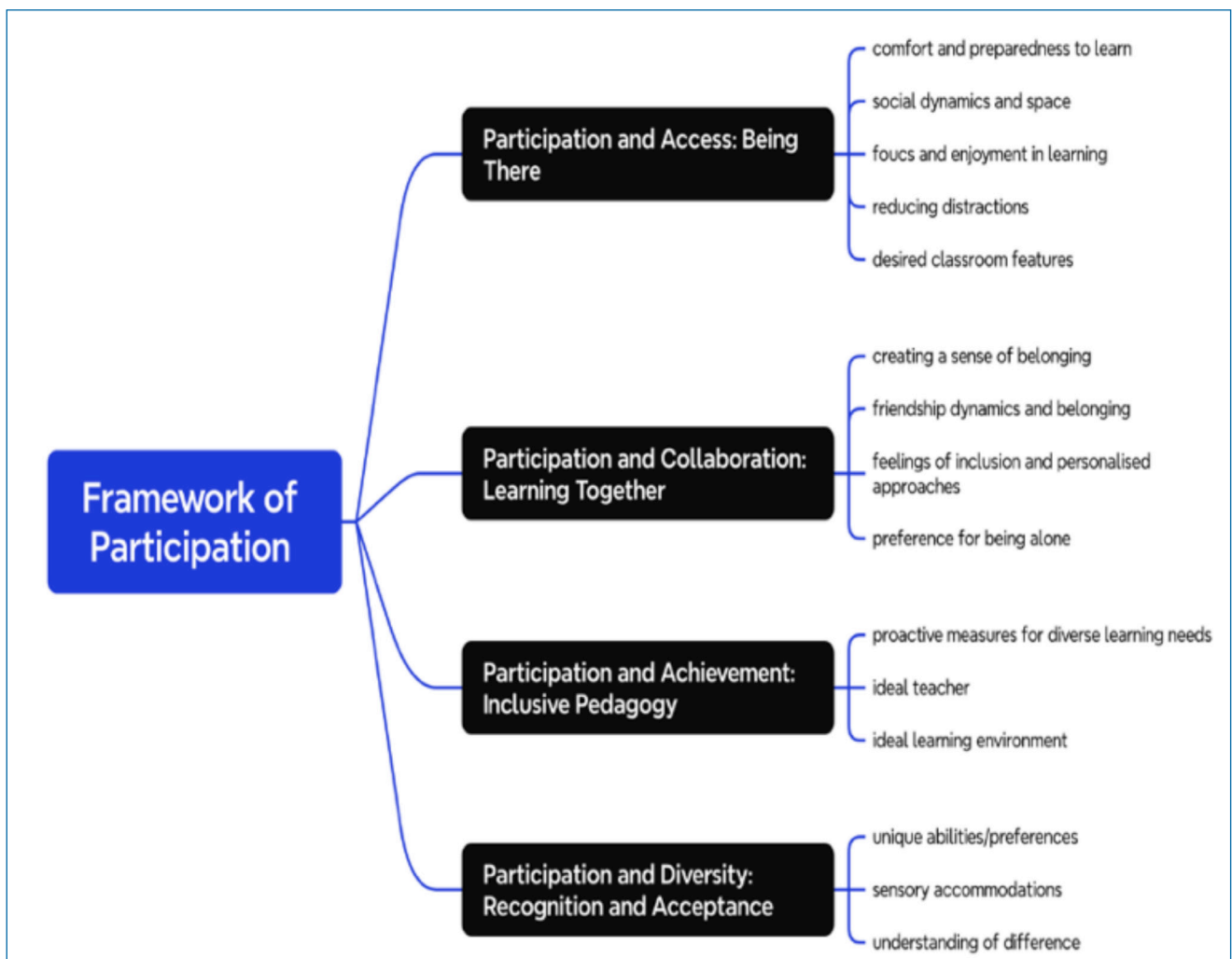
These multimodal methods accommodated varied communication styles and provided opportunities for both verbal and non-verbal expression. Verbal contributions were transcribed, while creative artefacts and researcher observations captured non-verbal data. Input from teachers and SNAs further enriched the dataset.

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework, supported by colour-coded matrices (Bree & Gallagher, 2016) to identify patterns across contributions. To enhance analytic rigour, redundant codes were refined and consolidated using Black-Hawkins’ (2014) Framework of Participation, which foregrounds multiple dimensions of inclusive practice. Triangulation of data sources further strengthened the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

## FINDINGS

Analysis of the data generated four interconnected themes: Participation and Access, Collaboration and Belonging, Inclusive Pedagogy, and Recognition and Diversity. Together, these highlight how autistic students experience inclusion, what they value in learning environments, and how they articulate belonging and difference. The themes integrate both direct student quotations and non-verbal artifacts (e.g. LEGO® models, friendship chains, spider diagrams, doodles), ensuring that multiple modes of expression are recognised as authentic forms of student voice.

**Figure 1:** Framework of Participation and Sub Themes



## THEME 1: PARTICIPATION AND ACCESS

Students consistently emphasised the importance of comfort and sensory-friendly environments as prerequisites for participation. For example, one student explained:

*“The sensory room first thing in the morning gives me a good chance to prepare for the day.”* (P2)

Others described the value of physical comfort and calming resources:

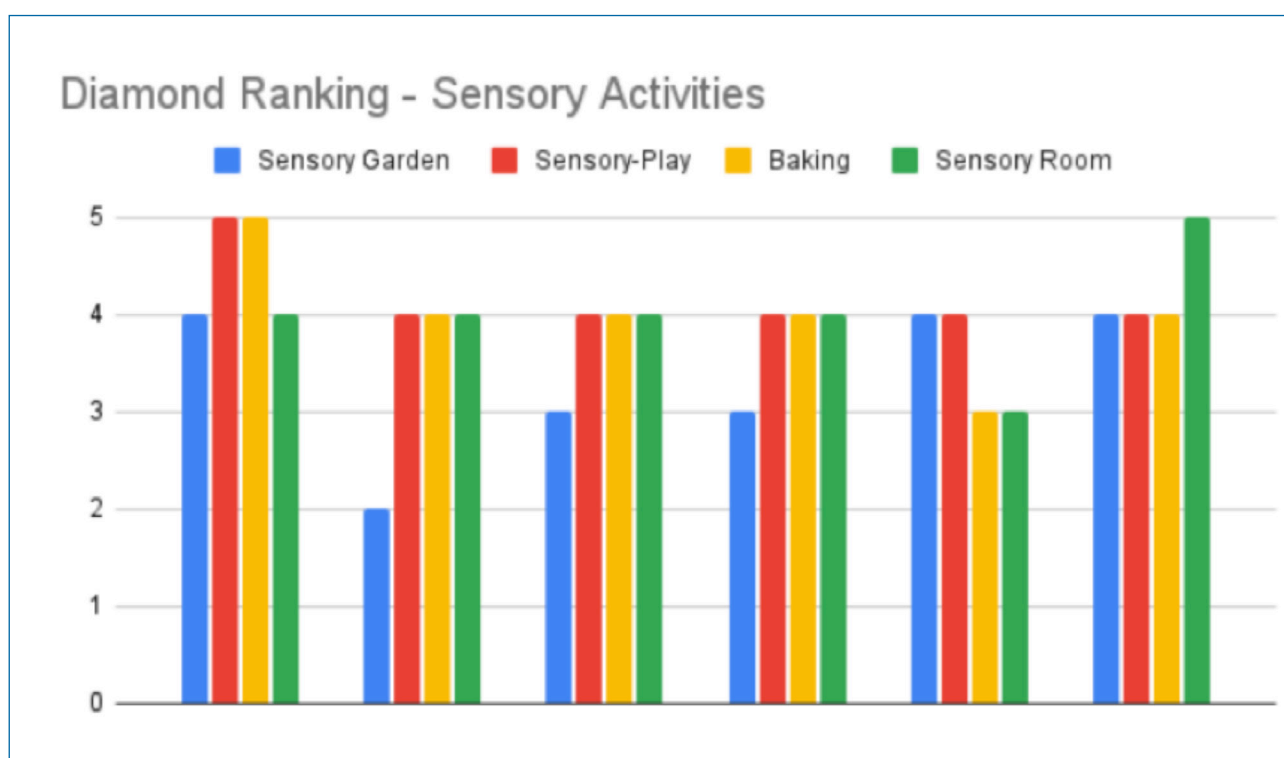
*“Beanbags in the corner.”* (P1)

*“Cosy cushions.”* (P3)

*“Music in the background.”* (P4)

These accounts echo Ashburner et al. (2008), who found sensory processing challenges significantly influence autistic students’ classroom engagement.

**Figure 2:** Sensory Activities (Preferences from Diamond Ranking Data).



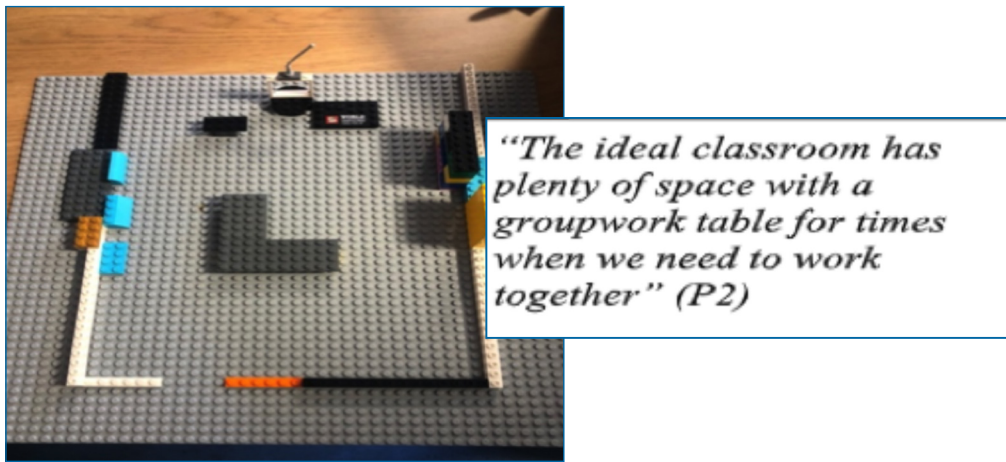
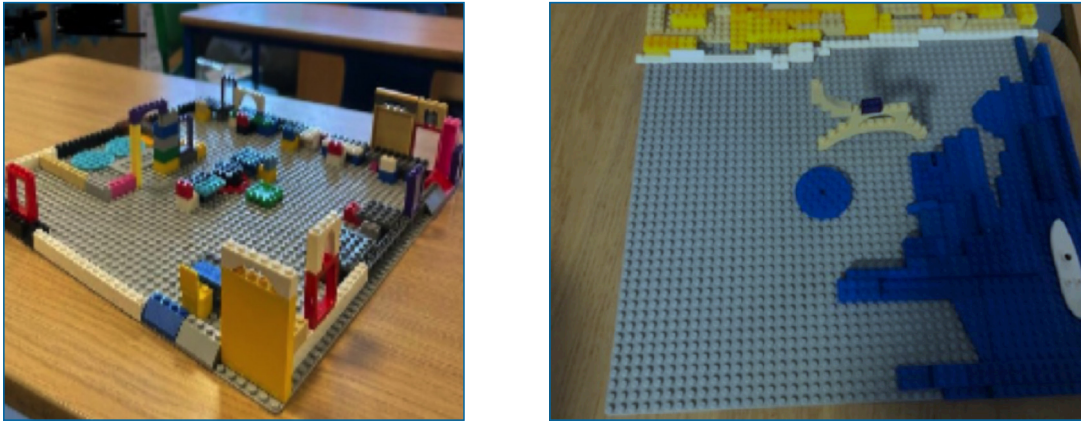
Students also generated non-verbal representations of participation. Through LEGO® Serious Play®, several boys built models showing swings, beanbags, and “quiet corners.”

*“Expansion to the chill-out zone – have a swing in it.”* (P4)

*“A treadmill for exercise for a walking break or a gym in the classroom.”* (P2)

*“Classrooms should be calm ... like the beach.”* (P5)

**Figure 3:** LEGO® models of students' ideal classroom.



**Figure 4:** Bean Pot Activity: Students ranking preferred and non-preferred activities.

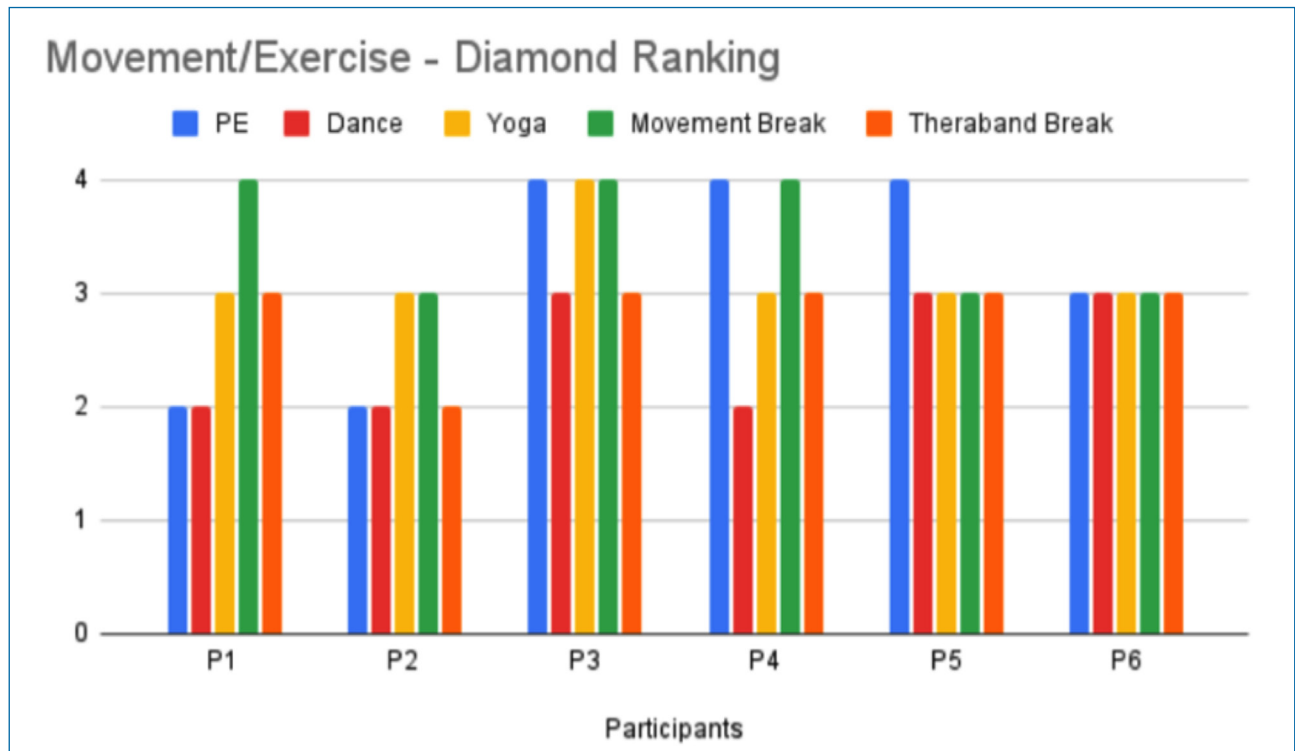


The Bean Pot activity further revealed preferences and aversions. Students placed art, PE, and project work into the "yes" pot, while tests and homework went into the "no" pot. One student explained:

*"I don't like tests. They make me feel nervous. But projects are fun because I can choose." (P2)*

These findings illustrate that participation is contingent not only on access but also on flexibility, choice, and attention to sensory regulation.

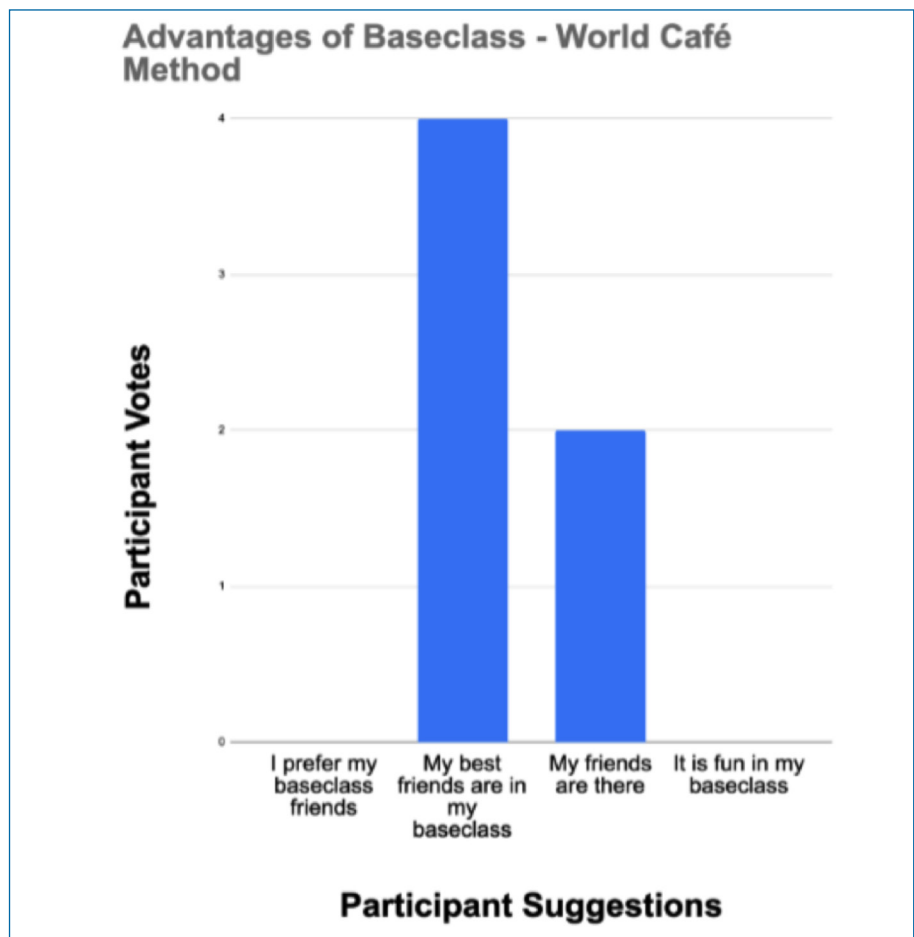
**Figure 5:** Movement Preferences (Diamond Ranking Data).



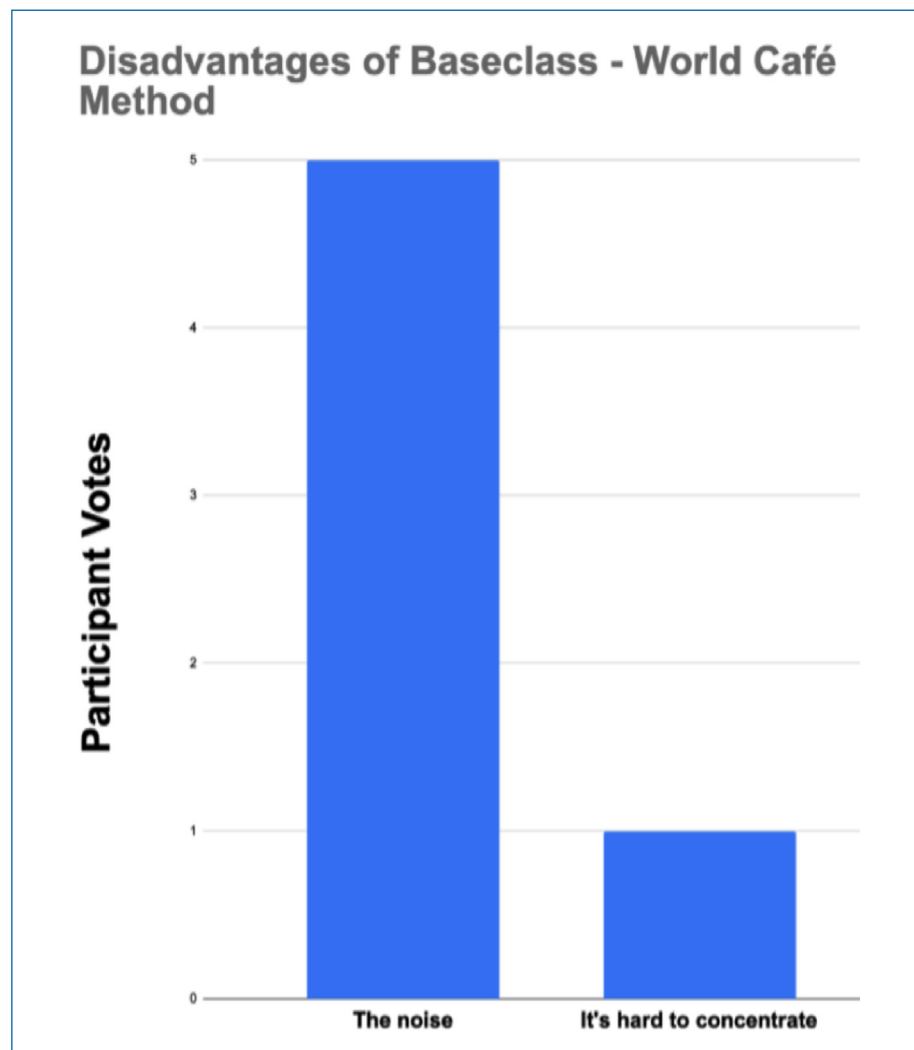
**THEME 2: COLLABORATION AND BELONGING**

Friendship and belonging emerged as central but complex aspects of the boys’ experiences. For some, the autism class provided comfort and familiarity, while others preferred their mainstream peers.

**Figure 6:** Advantages of Mainstream/Autism Class (World Café Method Data).



**Figure 7:** Disadvantages of Mainstream/Autism Class (World Café Method Data).



*"75% I feel I fit in in (Autism Class). In my base class fully yes as I have been with them since Junior Infants and I feel comfortable." (P1)*

*"Honestly, they (friends) feel the same (in both settings) and they make me feel happy." (P4)*

*"Classroom is obviously better as the people in (Autism Class) are straight up annoying – I prefer my friends from my base class. In (Autism Class) my friends are very different to me." (P5)*

Some students expressed confusion or difficulty navigating social situations:

*"I basically feel confused all of the time." (P1)*

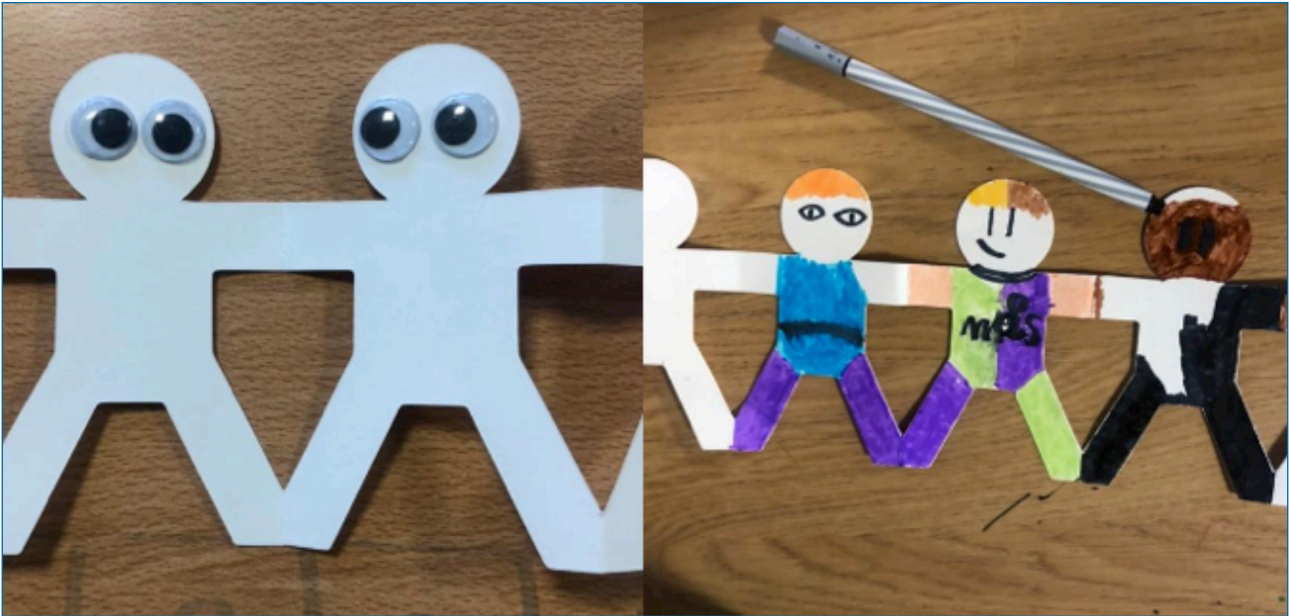
*"They can be talking about a subject that I know very little about." (P3)*

Others highlighted the positive qualities they valued in friends:

*"All friends are different, and you can play different games with different friends... I like playing Lego." (P1)*

*"I like friends that are kind, loyal and talking nice behind my back – they don't say bad things when I'm not there. Not sneaky friends." (P4)*

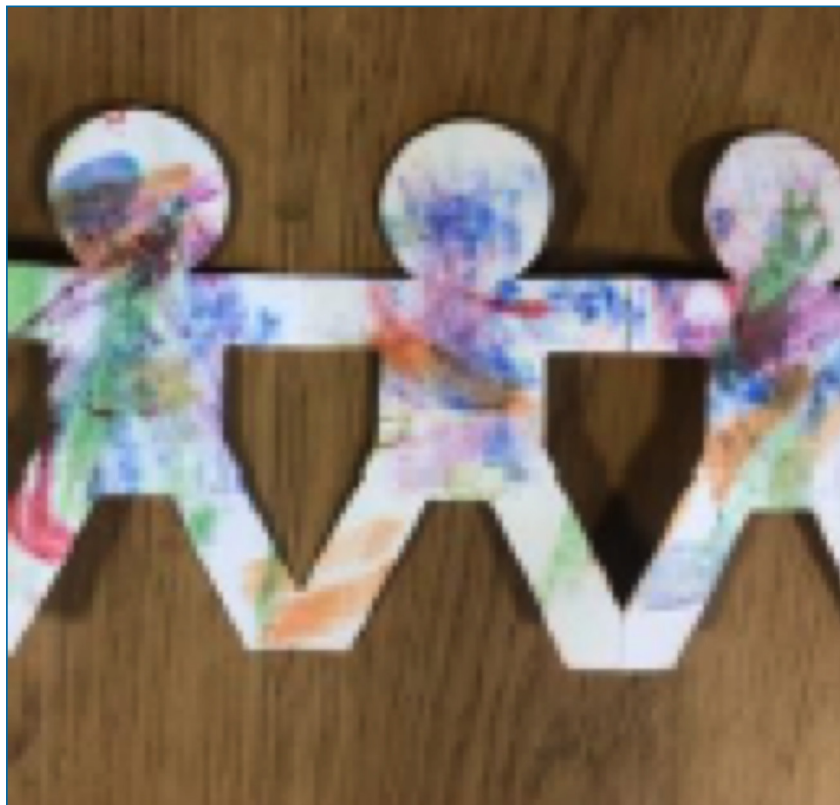
**Figure 8:** Friendship Chain representing Belonging.



The Friendship Chain activity visually represented these dynamics. One student described his artwork as:

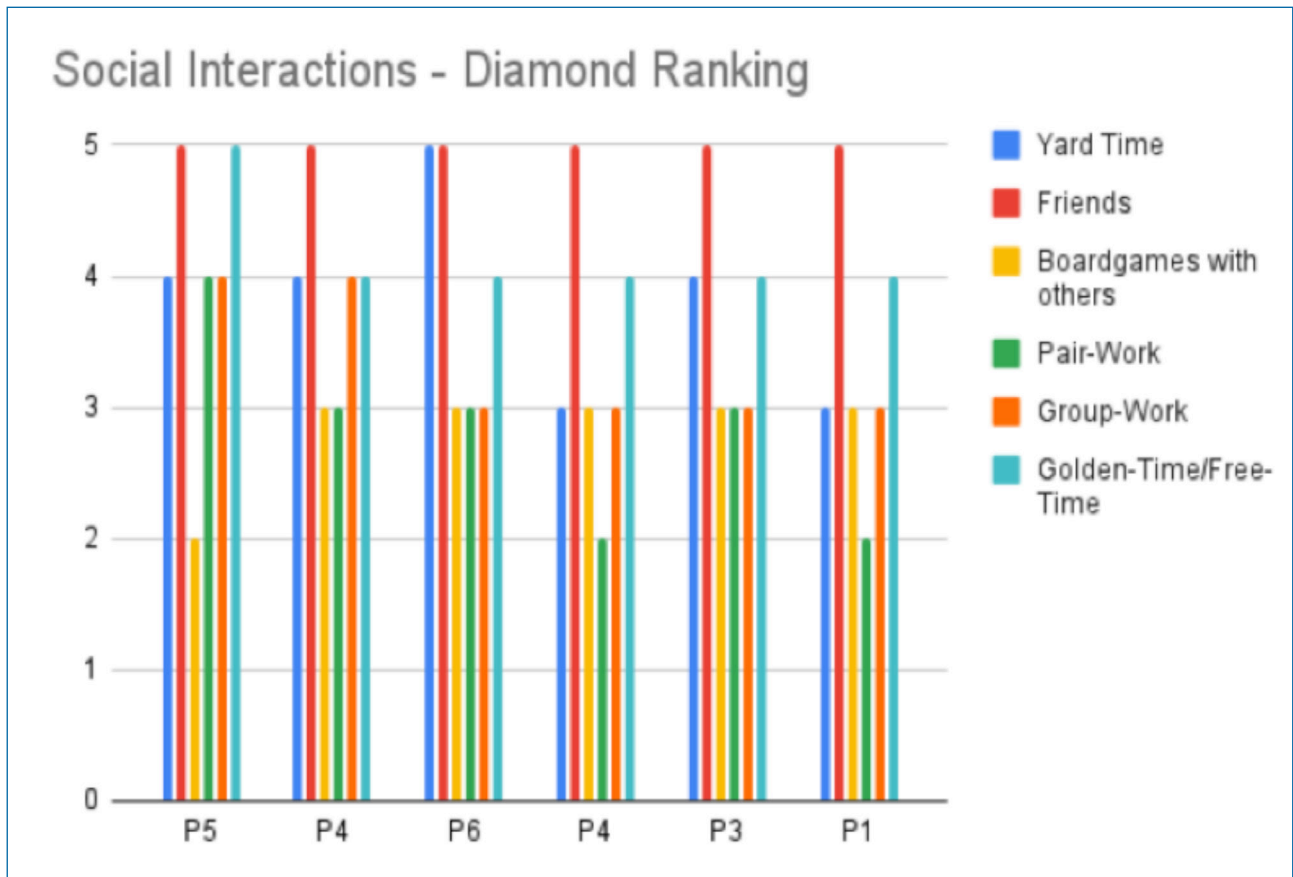
*“The prints that friends leave.”* (P4)

**Figure 9:** “The prints that friends leave.” (P4)



These insights show how belonging is both relational and fragile: friendships can foster joy and security, yet exclusion or misunderstanding remains a risk. As Calder et al. (2013) argue, autistic children’s friendships often reflect both resilience and vulnerability, highlighting the need for inclusive environments that nurture authentic peer connections.

**Figure 10:** Social Interaction Preferences (Diamond Ranking Data).



**THEME 3: INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY**

Students voiced a strong desire for teaching that was flexible, empathetic, and responsive rather than standardised or harsh. They identified relational qualities as central to good teaching:

- “Kind and happy, speaks in a soft gentle voice – doesn’t shout – they make you feel happy and in the green zone.” (P5)*
- “Be kind to the pupils, correct pupils but don’t let your voice get too high or angry.” (P2)*
- “A teacher should understand the way you are feeling.” (P2)*
- “A teacher that makes me feel safe.” (P5)*

These insights reinforce the importance of relational pedagogy, echoing Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) and Rose and Shevlin (2021), who highlight kindness, empathy, and adaptability as foundational to inclusive teaching.

The Teacher Spider exercise allowed students to map these ideas visually. In their spider diagrams, “kind” consistently appeared at the centre, supported by qualities such as “helpful,” “funny,” and “understanding.”

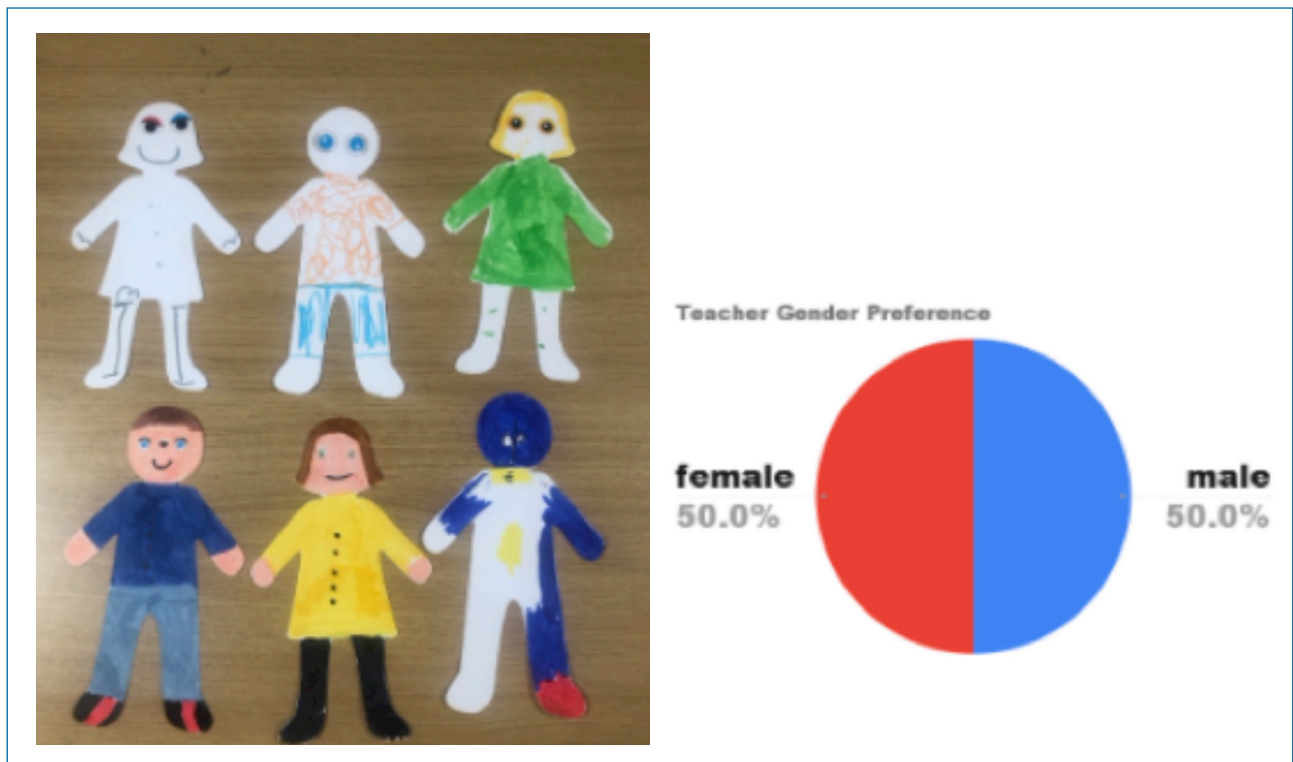
**Figure 11:** Spider Diagram illustrating student-identified qualities of an Ideal Teacher.



**Figure 12:** Undesirable Characteristics of a Teacher (Spider Diagram Data).



**Figure 13:** Gender Preferences of the Ideal Teacher.



Students also engaged in the Diamond Ranking activity to prioritise school subjects. Creative subjects such as art, PE, and project work consistently ranked highest, while tests and copying activities were placed at the bottom.

Figure 14: Diamond ranking of school activities.

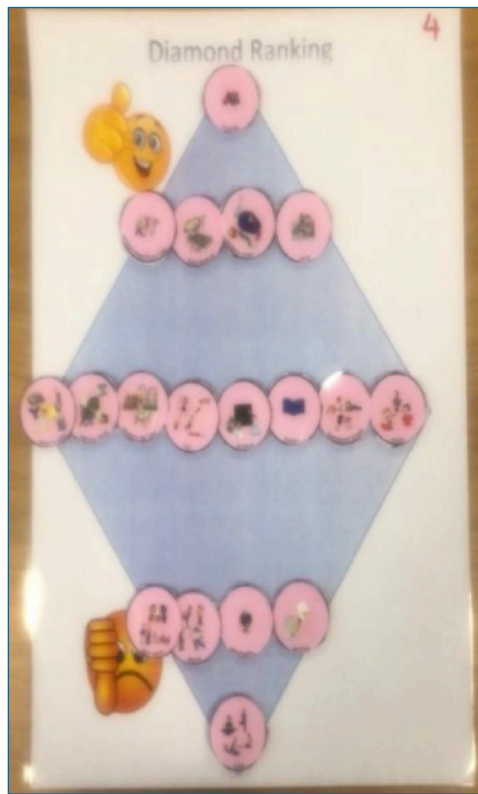
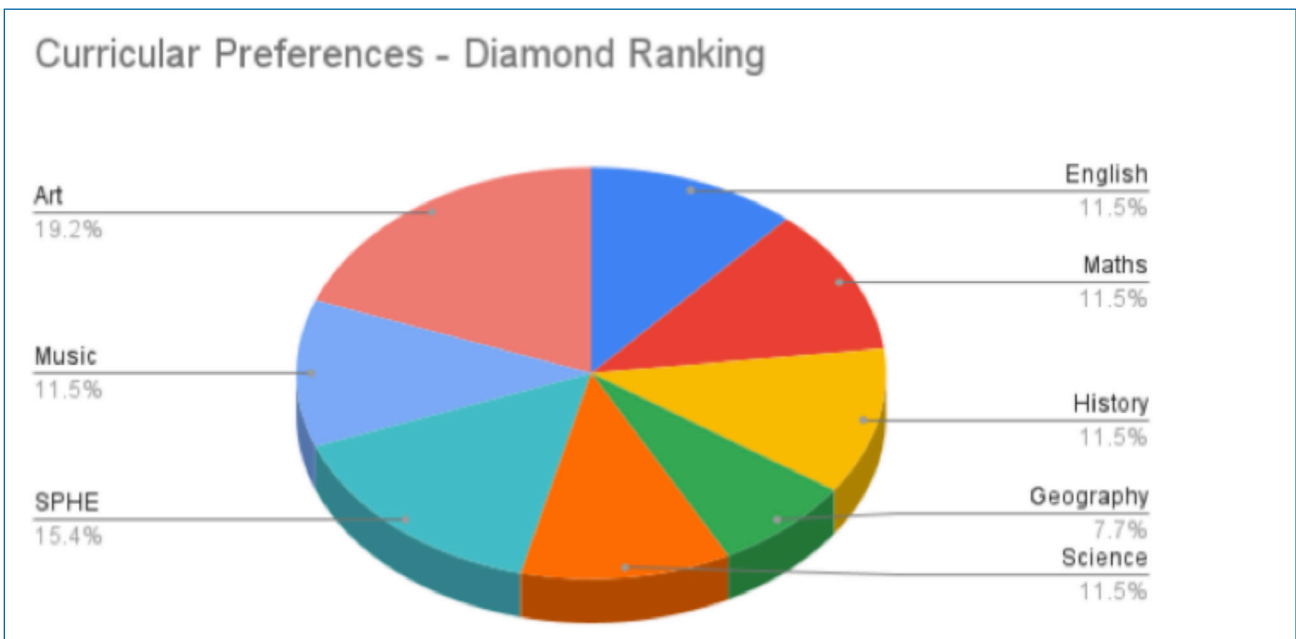


Figure 15: Curricular Preferences (Diamond Ranking Data).



These findings highlight students' clear preference for learning environments that value creativity, autonomy, and relational support over rigid academic measures. This resonates with Goodall's (2015) perception of an Autism-friendly school and McCormack (2019), who stresses that teacher professional development must go beyond technical strategies to address attitudes and relational competence.

## THEME 4: RECOGNITION AND DIVERSITY

Participation and diversity in education demand recognition and acceptance. For the students in this study, this meant a classroom where differences were understood and valued, and where teachers provided both flexibility and emotional support. As one student explained:

*“A teacher that understands your abilities.” (P4)*

Another highlighted the importance of creative, personalised learning:

*“Activities that would evoke more creativity – people that can explain things to you in a different way – a way that suits you.” (P2)*

These perspectives echo Hummerstone and Parsons (2021), who argue that autistic students often prioritise emotional support and innovative teaching approaches, yet staff may focus narrowly on academics.

Sensory activities emerged as central for concentration, regulation, and engagement. Students valued opportunities to self-regulate:

*“A teacher might let you use fidgets.” (P2)*

*“I really like the sensory room because if I am not feeling good I can go there and if I am feeling good I can also go there.” (P1)*

Students also linked creativity to regulation, describing drawing and doodling as strategies to support focus:

*“I like to draw as I think.” (P4)*

*“Yeah ... so do I ... doodle!” (P2)*

*“Me too!” (P5)*

Yet sensory tools were not universally welcomed, showing the importance of flexibility and choice:

*“I like therabands – they are cool – I love to stretch my body.” (P3)*

*“I don’t – I’m scared of them snapping.” (P4)*

These exchanges highlight how autistic students balance common ground with diverse preferences. They illustrate the need for inclusive pedagogy that values individuality, recognises contrasting perspectives, and supports agency.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Across all themes, students emphasised the importance of:

- Comfort and sensory regulation (Participation and Access).
- Fragile but vital friendships (Collaboration and Belonging).
- Flexible, creative pedagogy (Inclusive Pedagogy).
- Recognition of individuality and voice (Recognition and Diversity).

These findings contribute to a richer understanding of inclusion, rooted in autistic children’s own voices, verbal and non-verbal alike.

## DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore autistic children’s perspectives on classroom experiences and to foreground their voices in shaping inclusive pedagogy. By using participatory and creative methods, the findings revealed nuanced insights into participation, belonging, pedagogy, and recognition of diversity. This discussion interprets those findings in relation to existing literature, highlights the novelty of the study, and reflects on limitations and directions for future research.

## **PARTICIPATION AND ACCESS**

Students' prioritisation of calm, sensory-friendly environments emphasises the centrality of comfort to participation. This echoes Ashburner et al. (2008), who found that sensory processing difficulties significantly affect classroom engagement. The children's emphasis on quiet zones, beanbags, and swings reflects the guidance of the Department of Education (2022c), which calls for personalised learning environments in autism classes. Importantly, the children's LEGO® models and verbal suggestions demonstrate that they not only identify challenges but also generate practical solutions.

The Bean Pot activity reinforced the idea that autistic students value choice in learning. By ranking projects and creative work as preferred, and tests or homework as aversive, the students articulated the importance of autonomy in curriculum design. This supports Goodall (2015), who argues that ASD-friendly schools must balance academic demands with engagement and self-expression.

## **COLLABORATION AND BELONGING**

The children's accounts of friendship reveal the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of belonging. For some, peers in mainstream classes represented stability and comfort, while others valued the support and familiarity of the autism class. These findings align with Calder et al. (2013), who highlighted both opportunities and challenges in autistic children's social relationships.

The friendship chain artifacts illustrated both connection and fragility. Long, continuous chains symbolised secure ties, while shorter chains highlighted exclusion or loneliness. Booth and Ainscow's (2016) *Index for Inclusion* positions belonging as a central dimension of inclusion. This study adds weight to that argument by showing how autistic children themselves visualise belonging through creative expression.

## **INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY**

The findings highlight a strong preference for flexible, individualised teaching. Students rejected "standardised work" in favour of differentiated projects, aligning with Florian and Black-Hawkins' (2011) inclusive pedagogy, which resists ability grouping and focuses on diversity.

The Teacher Spider diagrams reinforced the centrality of relational pedagogy: kindness, patience, and humour were prioritised over academic skills. This echoes Rose and Shevlin (2021), who argue that relationality is critical for inclusion in Ireland. Similarly, the Diamond Ranking activity demonstrated that creativity, art, and movement were valued above rote learning, highlighting the importance of balancing academic rigour with opportunities for engagement.

Importantly, frustrations about being underestimated in mainstream classrooms highlight persistent deficit perspectives. McCormack (2019) emphasises that teacher professional development must address not only strategies for differentiation but also attitudes that may limit autistic students' potential.

## **RECOGNITION AND DIVERSITY**

The findings show that autistic children are aware of both their individual needs and broader dynamics of disclosure and difference. Divergent responses to sensory tools (therabands) highlighted the inadequacy of universal solutions, supporting UDL's insistence on multiple means of engagement (CAST, 2024).

Identity and agency were also central. Calls for student voice in school decision-making reflect Article 12 of the UNCRC, highlighting the ethical and legal imperative to include children in decisions that affect them. Non-verbal doodles depicting nervousness and regulation further demonstrate the expressive richness of participatory methods, aligning with O'Keeffe and McNally (2025), who highlight strengths-based approaches to autistic play and creativity.

## **CONTRIBUTION AND NOVELTY**

This study contributes uniquely to inclusive education in Ireland by placing autistic children's own voices, both verbal and non-verbal, at the centre of analysis. While much Irish research has focused on teacher or parent perspectives (e.g., McCormack, 2019), few studies have given such prominence to children's creations, symbols, and metaphors.

By employing LEGO® Serious Play®, friendship chains, Bean Pot activities, and doodles, this research demonstrates that autistic children can meaningfully co-construct knowledge when provided with accessible methods. This advances participatory approaches in autism research, responding directly to calls for research *with* autistic people rather than *on* them (Ne’eman, 2011; Zanuttini, 2023).

## LIMITATIONS

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample was small (six boys) and from a single suburban school, limiting generalisability. Perspectives of autistic girls, secondary students, or children in diverse socio-economic contexts may differ. The researcher’s dual role as teacher may also have shaped responses, despite efforts to mitigate power dynamics through creative methods and reflexivity.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the transformative potential of inclusive pedagogy when autistic children’s voices are placed at the centre of educational practice. Through participatory workshops using creative, multimodal methods, six boys in a senior autism class articulated their perspectives on participation, belonging, teaching, and diversity. Their contributions highlighted the importance of sensory accommodations, flexible pedagogy, and authentic peer relationships in creating learning environments where autistic students can thrive. By integrating both verbal and non-verbal expressions, including LEGO® models, friendship chains, and doodles, the study illustrates the diverse ways autistic children communicate their experiences. It also responds to the ethical imperatives of the UNCRC (Articles 2, 5, 12) and the UNCRPD, affirming children’s rights to express their views and participate in decisions that affect their lives.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

### Policy

The findings indicate the need for policy frameworks that meaningfully embed autistic children’s perspectives in the development of inclusive education strategies. National and local initiatives should support the use of participatory and creative methods to ensure that autistic learners’ views contribute to systemic change.

### Teacher Education and Professional Development

Teacher education should address not only pedagogical strategies but also relational competencies. Initial teacher education and continuing professional development must support:

- flexible and differentiated approaches to instruction
- the application of UDL principles to promote multiple pathways for engagement and expression
- opportunities for teachers to learn directly from autistic students’ accounts of comfort, belonging, and participation

Such approaches can challenge deficit-based assumptions and promote inclusive, responsive classroom practice.

### Classroom Practice

The insights provided by students point to practical strategies that can enhance day-to-day inclusion. These include:

- fostering creativity and choice through art, movement, and project-based learning
- strengthening peer relationships and belonging by drawing on students’ own definitions of friendship and inclusion
- accommodating sensory differences through quiet zones, flexible seating, and optional regulation tools
- promoting student agency by creating formal opportunities for autistic learners to contribute to decision-making within the classroom

These practices align closely with UDL principles and reflect students’ clearly expressed preferences.

## Future Research

Future studies should extend participatory approaches to a broader range of educational contexts, including secondary schools where belonging and identity may become more complex. Longitudinal research could explore how autistic students' perspectives develop over time and across transitions. Research should also include autistic girls, non-speaking autistic children, and pupils from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to deepen understanding of inclusive pedagogy. In addition, there is a need to examine how autistic students' insights can be systematically incorporated into teacher professional development and whole-school planning.

## Concluding Remarks

This research contributes a distinctive perspective to inclusive education in Ireland by showing that autistic children are not passive recipients of support but active, insightful co-constructors of knowledge. As one participant observed, "Kids can have a voice to help run the school. Teachers shouldn't decide everything." Listening to such voices brings educators and policymakers closer to realising inclusion as a lived experience rather than an aspiration. As Eisner (1992) reminds us, "different ways of seeing give us different worlds." Embracing autistic children's perspectives offers one such way of seeing—and moves us toward classrooms that are inclusive not only in principle but also in practice.

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