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‘ruling passions’ and embracing neurodiversity through  
classroom literacies**

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# 'Neurodivergent literacies': exploring autistic adults' 'ruling passions' and embracing neurodiversity through classroom literacies

Chris Bailey 

## Abstract

The concept of neurodiversity has fuelled a social justice movement advocating for the rights of those whose lives diverge from a socially-constructed default. However, deficit understandings of disability persist in educational settings and neurodivergent people continue to face disadvantage and discrimination in organisations constructed on normative understandings of the world. Although New Literacy Studies is concerned with ideas of power, dominance and worth, there is a notable lack of work that connects NLS with issues of neurodiversity. In this paper, I introduce the term 'neurodivergent literacies' to propose a field of study that links the ideological model of literacy with the neurodiversity paradigm. From this starting point, I outline a project that examined literacies around what are often referred to as the 'special interests' of autistic people. Presenting data from interviews with 13 neurodivergent adults, related to school experiences and the literacies they engage with around their self-defined 'ruling passions', I make recommendations for literacies practitioners, arguing that schools need to do more to take account of difference and disability. By describing how 'neurodivergent literacies' can help teachers harness their own critical literacy skills to challenge deficit models of difference in the classroom, this paper illuminates how an understanding of neurodiversity is essential for anyone teaching and researching literacies with a commitment to social justice.

**Key words:** autism, disability, literacies, neurodiversity, neurodivergence, reading, social justice

## Introduction

In recent years, the concept of neurodiversity (Singer, 1999) has been embraced by those advocating for the rights, respect, and inclusion of people whose lives diverge from a socially-constructed neurotypical default. However, neurodivergent ways of thinking,

feeling and being are still framed in deficit terms, while pathologising approaches to disability persist within societal structures, including educational institutions. Many children and adults continue to face disadvantage and discrimination because of their neurological difference, in organisations constructed on normative understandings of the world. Inequalities are further compounded for individuals whose identities are also marginalised in terms of race, gender, sexuality, economic background, and so on. While New Literacy Studies (NLS) has always been concerned with ideas of power, dominance and worth, there is a notable lack of existing work that connects NLS with issues of neurodiversity.

In this article I draw on interview data from a study that examines literacies in the lives of neurodivergent adults, related to what are often called autistic 'special interests'. From a NLS perspective these might be understood as 'ruling passions', a term that became an 'important organising concept' for Barton and Hamilton (1998, p. 18) when conducting interviews with people about their everyday 'local literacies'. While this literacy-centric concept was not devised as a description of *autistic* experience, it provides a useful starting point here for considering the intersections between an aspect of autistic culture and a NLS conception of literacies.

This study focuses particularly on participants' reflections on their educational experiences and the literacies pursued in their lives beyond education. I argue that educational institutions need to do more to take account of difference. I use insights from the participants to make recommendations for practice, with the overarching message that difference must be embraced, not merely accommodated. Furthermore, this article illuminates how an understanding of work around neurodiversity is essential for people who teach and research literacies and are committed to equality and social justice.

To frame this work's focus on what I call 'neurodivergent literacies', I begin by describing how the 'neurodiversity paradigm' (Walker, 2021) is congruent with 'ideological' notions of literacy (Street, 1984). I then outline the project, describing the participants and data-generation methods. Next, I use these data to explore participants' school experiences and the relationship between their 'special interests' and literacies. Finally, I consider the implications for practice, and future directions for research.

## Establishing a notion of neurodivergent literacies

Although the term 'neurodivergent literacies' has not been used in the literature, there is recent work that draws on the neurodiversity paradigm and NLS (Kleekamp, 2020; Smilges, 2021). This mobilises Walker (2021) and Yergeau's (2018) concept of 'neuroqueering' to consider how neurodivergence disrupts conventional enaction of literacy. Other significant texts explore literacies in relation to disability, adopting a social-model perspective (Barden, 2012; Flewitt et al., 2009). To make connections between this existing literature, and to stimulate future growth in this emergent area, I propose 'neurodivergent literacies' as a term to help define and shape this field. This concept unites two existing ideas: foundational principles of New Literacy Studies (Street, 2003) and 'neurodiversity' (Singer, 1999). Here, I clarify my position on the 'neurodiversity paradigm' (Walker, 2021) in relation to the 'ideological' model of literacy (Street, 1984) and explain why these are ontologically compatible. I also show how uniting these perspectives to describe a field of study provides a coherent direction for future research and practice.

### *New literacy studies*

New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2015; Street, 2003) is concerned with literacy as a 'social practice' (Street, 1984). Street (1984) outlines two oppositional models of literacy – autonomous and ideological. The autonomous model takes the reductive (but dominant) deficit-based view (Lea and Street, 2006) that literacy can be transferred to people, leading them to become 'literate' and resulting in a supposed process of cultural, social and economic transformation. Although reading and writing can be valuable tools, the notion that being 'more literate' leads to greater success or wellbeing is highly problematic. Street (2003, p. 77) suggests that power in the autonomous model of literacy arises from 'imposing Western conceptions of

literacy on to other cultures, or within a country those of one class or cultural group onto others'. Even seemingly progressive proponents of the autonomous model (through, for example, an emphasis on phonics teaching) are, at best, aligned with ideas of social mobility (Steadman and Ellis, 2021), rather than social justice.

By contrast, the 'ideological' model of literacy sees literacies (plural) as contingent on time and place and developed with specific purposes in mind. They are culturally and historically constructed, subject to power relations, always 'rooted in a particular world-view' (Street, 2003, p. 78). Literacies are multidimensional rather than singular, social rather than individual. By helping us understand how people enact literacies that are useful, meaningful, and powerful in their lives, the ideological model has facilitated a more nuanced understanding of the purpose of literacies in society (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Jones, 2018). With this model, NLS has helped expose barriers posed by dominant assumptions about literacy, critiquing narrow ideas of what it means to be 'literate' by 'illuminating the relationship between wider social, political, and economic contexts' (Jones, 2018, p. 183).

In this way, the ideological model is at the forefront of critical approaches to literacy education, aligning itself with principles of social justice by arguing for systemic and social change (McDougall et al., 2022; Pahl and Rowsell, 2020; Shelton, 2017).

### *Neurodiversity*

The concerns of the ideological model of literacy are strongly aligned with the neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2021). As well as a shared interest in social justice, both reject deficit-based approaches and embrace diverse ways of learning. The term 'neurodiversity' (Singer, 1999) holds that any population includes a diverse neurological makeup. While this concept is often associated with 'brains', the 'neuro-' pertains to 'neurology' which has synergies with what is called the 'body-mind' (Clare, 2017). Neurodiversity therefore relates to embodied experiences, challenging the artificial separation of these aspects of human existence. Ideas around neurodiversity have fired a social justice movement that has become a 'key force in promoting social change' (Kapp, 2020, p. 3) advocating for the rights, respect and inclusion of people whose lives diverge from a socially constructed default.

The term 'neurodivergent' was coined by Asasumasu (2015) to describe her 'multiply divergent' lived experiences. Neurodivergence is often associated with autism but being autistic is just one kind of

neurodivergence. While some seek to gate-keep the concept by restricting it to formal diagnoses of autism, ADHD, dyslexia, learning disability, and so on, I adopt an inclusive interpretation that does not require medical recognition or external identification. This conceptualisation aligns with Asasumasu's (2015) original definition of 'neurodivergent' as 'specifically a tool of inclusion'. I also align my approach with constructivist conceptualisations of neurodivergence. Chapman (2020) argues that the *reality* of autism is a social construction, in that it reflects material conditions and relations. Similarly, Jarrett (2020, p. 7) notes that 'intellectual disability is an idea, one which changes over time, and which has an overweening impact on those whose lives are lived within the definitional walls it places around them'. This does not mean that such experiences and dispositions are not *real* or lack biological basis. It acknowledges that the positioning of neurodivergent dispositions is a human enterprise contingent on the society that identifies them. This perspective may prompt arguments that we should reject *any* such labelling in favour of understanding that all individuals are, simply, different. That stance may *feel* valid but does not reflect the material reality of the world we live in. It ignores that society already pathologises difference, regardless of labelling, and obscures the value that terms/labels can have for individuals seeking to understand their experience of the world, helping them to form shared supportive communities.

While 'neurodivergent' is applied to individuals, the term 'neurotypical' is a relational position, used to classify the dominant neurological types considered 'normal' or default in society. The word neurotypical should not be considered a slur, in the same way that 'heterosexual' as the dominant sexuality does not imply negative judgement. Furthermore, what constitutes neurotypical is not fixed but is dependent on cultural and social contexts. However, lack of scrutiny of the power relations existing around societal positions (in relation to gender, race, sexuality, disability, class or neurotype) can lead to the perpetuation of social inequalities. Manning (2016, p. 3) suggests that neurotypicality 'frames our ideas of which lives are worth educating, which lives are worth living, and which lives are worth saving', positioning neurodiversity firmly as a social justice issue.

Misappropriations of 'neurodiversity' have crept into educational contexts. Along with the erroneous use of 'neurodiverse' to label individuals (an individual cannot be '*-diverse*'), there is a more insidious appropriation of language around neurodiversity which has not brought any changes in perspective, but merely acts as a thinly-veiled repackaging of old ideas aligned with the dominant 'pathology paradigm' (Walker, 2021, p. 9). For Walker (2021), this paradigm

has two assumptions: first, there is a right or 'normal' way for human minds to function; second, those who diverge from 'normal' ways of being have something wrong with them. To counter this, the 'neurodiversity paradigm' (Walker, 2021, p. 31), posits that there is no 'normal' human mind and that social dynamics involving other forms of diversity also play out in relation to neurotype. The neurodiversity paradigm also highlights what Manning (2016, p. 148) calls 'the neurotypical habit of pathologizing difference'.

### *Neurodivergent literacies*

I suggest that neurodivergent literacies, as a conjunction of the ideological model of literacy and the concept of neurodiversity, provides literacies researchers and practitioners with another lens on social justice. The 'Western conceptions of literacy' (Street, 2003) imposed (or *schooled*) via the autonomous model are inherently white, capitalist, heteronormative, ableist, *neurotypical* conceptions of literacy.

By concealing these dominant ideological values, the autonomous model creates the illusion that literacy is a neutral, value-free practice. The autonomous model quietly asserts that there is a single and correct way of 'being literate', as if literacies are natural processes, rather than human constructs. The autonomous model privileges speech above other forms of communication, such as sign language or Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) (Doak, 2020). Power is demonstrated, and gained, by engaging in dominant modes of communication, using institutionally 'appropriate' dialects (Escott and Pahl, 2019), or through consumption and creation of 'approved' texts via 'schooled literacy' (Moss, 2001, p. 147). Those who cannot 'perform' literacies at 'expected' levels are deemed to be lacking (Reay and Wiliam, 1999). As such, the pathology paradigm is intertwined with the autonomous model of literacy. The pathology paradigm asserts that there is a 'right' way of being, and that anyone who cannot engage with literacies in prescribed ways is judged to be 'abnormal' (Walker, 2021). Furthermore, the pathology paradigm is perpetuated through autonomous model texts including prescriptive curriculums, state sanctioned tests, ableist policies and restrictive medical frameworks that maintain existing power relations and filter those deemed 'normal' from those who are not (Walker, 2021). Both the autonomous model of literacy and the pathology paradigm are underpinned by deficit assumptions and driven by power relations that assert default ways of being and normative assumptions of worth.

In contrast, I suggest that the neurodiversity paradigm strongly accords with the principles of the



ideological model of literacy: both understand the world as socially and culturally constructed, and both work against dominant and simplistic conceptualisations of human experience. The ideological model recognises that people, as part of a (neuro) diverse population, make meanings around literacies in multiple ways (Bailey, 2022). It understands that there is no text with more inherent value than another and that no form of language is superior to another (Escott and Pahl, 2019). It acknowledges that dominant literacies grant power to some, while marginalising others by setting up 'hierarchies of the human' (Hackett, 2022, p. 135). It sees the value in diverse forms of communication, using different modes to support individual needs (Doak, 2020), recognising societal responsibility to ensure access to texts, rather than citing individual deficit (Lea and Street, 2006). This echoes the neurodiversity paradigm's perspective that there is no 'normal' kind of human mind, expected to engage with 'normal' kinds of literacies. Both perspectives understand that people have different needs, and that they learn in different ways. The ideological model also understands that, although texts can enforce deficit understandings, they can also be used to challenge the dominance of the pathology paradigm, through the elevation of perspectives from those who have not previously been part of the hegemonic, pathologising discourse.

### *Autism and literacy*

In my work previously (Bailey, 2022) I have described autism as 'an assemblage' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) of social and medicalised understandings which are culturally and historically contingent. Using the neurodiversity paradigm, Walker (2021, p. 81) understands autism as 'a complex set of interrelated characteristics' that 'produces distinctive, atypical ways of thinking, moving, interaction, and sensory and cognitive processing'. Historically, autism has been constructed in more pathologising ways, via tools such as the Autism Quotient (AQ) test, a 'brief assessment instrument' devised by Baron-Cohen et al. (2001, p. 15). Given its widespread use, the tool is arguably as responsible for constructing a deficit understanding of autism as for helping to 'identify' autistic individuals. It is also a lens through which teachers may have encountered the concept of autism, shaping their understandings of what an autistic person is or is not. The tool features 50 statements (points) on which an individual rates themselves on a scale of 'definitely agree' to 'definitely disagree'. Some of the points make assertions about the literacies that autistic people engage with. As well as asserting an autistic person

would rather go to a library than a party [#13], the test suggests that an autistic person 'of *normal* intelligence' (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001, p. 14) (emphasis is mine) is unlikely to enjoy reading fiction [#21], finds it hard to understand the intentions of a characters in books [#20] or imagine what the character might look like [#8] and would find it challenging to create stories [#14]. These assumptions are based on the problematic 'theory of mind' theory of autism (Baron-Cohen, 2001, p. 178) that claims autistic children lack an ability to 'mindread' in comparison with 'their *normal* counterparts' (emphasis is mine). The data from this project help to tell a more nuanced story.

### **Project and methodology**

Underpinned by the idea of 'neurodivergent literacies', this project explores what are historically constructed as the 'special interests' (Robinson and Vitale, 1954) of autistic adults, using a NLS lens (Street, 2003) to illuminate this important dimension of autistic culture. Autism has been associated with 'special interests' since Robinson and Vitale (1954, p. 755) wrote about 'children with circumscribed interest patterns' who 'develop special interests and sometimes special abilities', pursuing these with 'a concomitant withholding of interest or endeavour on other types of activity or areas of thought'. The diagnostic tool DSM-5 (APA, 2013, p. 9), used for most contemporary medical diagnoses, characterises such interests as 'restrictive and repetitive'. Such negative framings demonstrate how the term 'special interests' has origins in the pathology paradigm (Walker, 2021, p. 9). Much academic literature has followed suit, often framing these interests in reductive and stigmatising ways.

It has long been argued that studies of disability should account for the role of experience of individuals (Barnes, 2004) particularly in relation to social and contextual factors experienced by disabled people. The predominance of medicalised approaches to research, grounded in the pathology paradigm, has resulted in problematic constructions of knowledge around autism: these tend to side-line the perspectives of autistic people in favour of others deemed more 'expert'. This issue permeates autism research generally and research on autistic people's interests more specifically. Mindful of this issue, the study sought the perspectives of 13 neurodivergent adults, and was led by a neurodivergent researcher. The project was granted ethical approval by Sheffield Hallam University. Participants were recruited via a call on social media. All participants gave informed consent and pseudonyms are used throughout.

Figure 1 contains details of participants. The following points are worth noting. Given the 'significant

No.	Pseudonym *= chosen by participant	Age	Interview method	Pronouns	Self-described Race and / or Ethnicity	Ruling Passions (in alphabetical order - bold indicates a mention in this paper)
1	'Ben'	20	Video call	he/him	British, White	Coastguard Helicopters; Diagnosing Others (re Autism); <b>Dungeons and Dragons</b> ; <b>Lego City / Lego Star Wars</b> ; <b>Lifeboats</b> ; <b>London Underground</b>
2	'MEJ'*	42	In person	he/him	British, White	Bikes; <b>'A Christmas Carol' Book</b> ; <b>Guitars</b> ; Militaria; Noticing Detail
3	'Robert'	51	Video call	he/him	Indian / Irish	<b>Autism</b> ; <b>Rock Climbing / Mountaineering</b> ; <b>Cooking</b> ; Music; Patterns (of three); <b>Reading</b> ; Rugby; Squash
4	'Graham'	56	Video call	he/him	British, White	<b>Acoustics and music</b> ; <b>Autism</b> ; Cycling; Dinosaurs; Dr Who; Electricity and electronics; Playing bass guitar; <b>Reading</b> ; Running
5	'Ian'	66	Telephone call	he/him	British, White	Airfix / WWII Aircraft, Plastic Soldiers; <b>Philosophy</b> ; Symmetry (in the world); <b>The Lone Ranger</b>
6	'P'*	25	Video call	they/them	British, White	Cephalopods; Clarinet; Cuttlefish; Diseases; Enigma Machine; <b>LGBT History</b> ; <b>Music</b> ; Neuroscience; Philosophy; Psychology; <b>Reading</b> ; Rhythm; Scepticism
7	'Avery'*	39	Private messages	they/them	American, White	Automobile Modification; Building forts; Camping; Chess; Computers; Cycling; Electronics; Fashion; Gardening; <b>Gender (and related language)</b> ; Kite Photography; Lego; Model Rockets; Nutrition and Food Preparation; Orbital Mechanics; Psychology; <b>Reading</b> ; Sewing; Tabletop Roleplaying Games; Videogames: Kerbal Space Program; Woodworking; <b>Writing</b>
8	'Ashley'	42	Video call	they/them	British, White	<b>Autism</b> ; Breastfeeding and Childbirth; Iceland; Music; Old Norse Language; <b>Reading</b> ; Roller Derby; Star Trek Knitting (and 'nerd' knitting); Videogames: Minesweeper, Stardew Valley, Tetris; Words and Vocabulary
9	'Emma'	18	Email exchange	they / them	British/ Scottish, White	Fish; <b>Video games</b> : Dark Souls, Metroid, <b>Monster hunter</b> ; RPGs; Tabletop war games
10	'Laura'	33	Video call	she / her	British, White	Animals; Cartoons; Clothes; David Attenborough Mole video; Dinosaurs; Trainers; <b>Film and Television</b> ; Nature; Sonic the Hedgehog
11	'Catharine'	38	In person	she/ her	British, White	Autism; <b>Collecting</b> – vintage tins, <b>children's books</b> ; Learning the history of objects and places; <b>Manic Street Preachers</b> ; <b>Reading</b> ; Playing violin; <b>Serial Killers</b> ; Vintage Clothes; <b>Vintage Items</b>
12	'Kate'	40	Email exchange	she / her	British, White	Biology; Board Games; <b>Cooking</b> ; Gardening; Nature; Plants; <b>Science Books</b> ; PSHE; Tudor History; <b>Novels</b> ; Knitting; <b>Vampires</b>
13	'Solange'*	50	questionnaire	she / her	African, Brown	<b>Autism</b> ; God; Singing; Taking Photos of Nature

Figure 1: Participant information

1. What can you tell me about yourself in relation to autism / being autistic (and / or neurodivergent)?
2. What do you understand about the concept of 'special interests'?
3. What do you think of the term 'special interest'? Do you have a preferred term?
4. Can you tell me anything about your own experience of 'special interests'? I am interested in your current interests, as well as ones that you may have had in the past.
5. Have these interests changed over time? Since childhood? How? (You might like to think of now in relation to school)
6. Can you tell me any more about your school experience?
7. How have 'special interests' impacted your life? Did you have opportunities to explore these interests further in educational contexts?
8. Are there any ways in which your interests have involved literacies eg. reading / writing / communication / creation of texts?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I have not asked?

Figure 2: Outline of questions

barriers to obtaining a diagnosis' (Sarrett, 2016, p. 33), participants were not required to have a medical autism diagnosis, although 12 of the 13 participants did report an 'official' diagnosis. Some were identified in childhood, some in later life. Several participants were multiply-neurodivergent, associating with terms such as ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia. The number of trans and gender-nonconforming participants (4/13) reflects the greater gender diversity in the autistic community (Warrier et al., 2020) compared to the wider population. The absence of

participants with a coexisting learning disability is a limitation which I will remedy in a later stage of the project.

Participants were invited to choose their preferred communication mode to participate in a 'semi-structured interview' (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). Sample questions can be seen in Figure 2. Choice of mode was offered because one of the ways in which the 'atypical' autistic experience (Walker, 2021) manifests is in relation to speech and language. As one of the participants, Avery, explained:

*... sometimes I struggle with the mental part of language ... converting thoughts into words into syllables into phonemes. Other times I struggle with orchestrating the wide variety of muscles used to produce the sounds of speech ... so text-based communication is my go-to when I'm having a hard voice day.*

To meet participants' preferences, I interviewed two face-to-face, six by video-call, one by telephone, two by email, one via direct-messaging, and one completed a questionnaire. Interviews with audio components were recorded and transcribed. For text-based interviews, the data were exported to an individual document for each participant.

This article addresses three research questions:

1. *What was the nature of participants' school experience?*
2. *How did participants' intense interests relate to literacies?*
3. *How could related literacies help improve school experience for neurodivergent children?*

Although all participants were adults, these questions predominantly relate to childhood experience. Engaging with adult participants was beneficial for two main reasons. Firstly, they were able to give insights into the meanings made around literacies both during and *beyond* childhood, providing important context to their earlier interests that often held enduring significance. Secondly, autism recognition in childhood is still constrained by limited medical and cultural understandings (Crane et al., 2018; Lockwood Estrin et al., 2021). Engaging with a group of adults, several of who may not have been identified as autistic during childhood, helped to diversify the pool of participants, particularly in relation to gender. This said, the findings presented here should not be seen as an attempt to generalise between adult and childhood experience, and there is undoubtedly a need to involve children as participants in research around neurodivergent literacies.

Texts were analysed in NVIVO, using a thematic approach (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Macro-level deductive coding was used to identify aspects of the transcripts relating to education and/or literacies. Inductive coding then helped identify micro-level detail relating to the first two questions. Connections were made between participants' accounts to shape a 'coherent narrative' (Kiger and Varpio, 2020, p. 852) through the data, representing all perspectives. Four thematic headings (below) that organise the data should be recognised as a heuristic device, used to 'connect elements of the data' (Kiger and Varpio, 2020, p. 848), rather than presenting a definitive reading of the data. The quotes are presented as an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) of autistic/neurodivergent perspectives, highlighting

the heterogeneity of experiences recounted by participants, rather than an attempt at reductive homogeneity characteristic of the pathology paradigm. Reflections on data across these themes resulted in the response to question 3, by way of the discussion and implications outlined below. As an autistic and multiply neurodivergent adult myself, there are many experiences I recognise from my life, but also several that differ from my own. In the organisation and analysis, I sought to be led by the data, rather than influenced by my own experience, ensuring that I did not privilege examples from the data that matched my own recollections of childhood.

## Language

Due to its medicalised origins (Robinson and Vitale, 1954), the term 'special interest' can be seen as a product of the pathology paradigm. Bottema-Beutel et al. (2021 p. 20) suggest that alternative, less 'patronising' terms include 'focused, intense, or passionate interests'. That said, many participants positively embraced the term 'special interest'. Although some recognised '*negative connotations of the word special*' (Avery), most were happy to adopt the term 'special interests' to describe their own ruling passions. Some suggested other phrases (including the contraction 'Spin') and I therefore use a range of synonyms throughout the paper. I use identity-first language (Botha et al., 2022), reflecting the preferences of participants and the wider autistic community.

## School experience

Participants were asked about their school experiences. Consistent with research suggesting that autistic children are 'considerably more likely to be bullied than those with other or no SEND' (Humphrey and Hebron, 2015, p. 845) many of the accounts were negative, especially regarding the social experience of being in an institution. Experiences of bullying were common, regardless of how recently participants had attended school. Robert recalled '*I was the most appalling victim of bullying*'. Graham remembered '*I was wary of other kids a lot of the time. I was bullied quite a lot ... more than once after junior school I was followed and kicked unconscious ...*'. Emma, the most recent school-leaver, reported that '*for years I was pretty badly bullied, and I learned to mask very well*'. Here, 'masking' (Livingston et al., 2020) refers to the emotionally harmful process by which autistic people suppress authentic ways of

presenting ourselves to conform with societal expectations.

Again, consistent with recent research (Botha et al., 2022), several participants recalled not fitting in and feeling alienated. Solange explained that she *'went to a mainstream school back in Africa but struggled with socialising and keeping friends ...'*. Similarly, Ian stated *'I was quite lonely'*, suggesting that autistic children are generally *'the ones that stand at the end of the playground'*. Catharine reflected *'I knew that I didn't fit in ... but I didn't know why'*. 'P' described their experience as *'alienating from the rest of my classmates'*. For some, teachers also contributed to negative experiences. Graham recalled that PE teachers ran lessons involving *'structured victimisation'* in the practice of *'picking sides'*. Ian reflected that *'teachers were definitely not positive people in my life'*, recalling only one teacher who was willing to use his preferred name, which felt like *'a big thing'*. Emma was put off studying their passionate interest in computing because they *'didn't like the teacher'*. In all, the main reason outlined for not enjoying school was the unsuitable social environment.

Not all participants disliked school, and positive experiences tended to be related to their interests. Kate remembered that she *'just loved learning ... school allowed me to pursue subjects like History, Science'*. The most positive accounts came from Avery, who was home-schooled: *'My mother met me where I was ... she was able to adapt lessons to my way of thinking ... That included special interests. She'd often give me the opportunity to write essays on some of my spins, which was a stroke of genius on her part.'* Others recalled occasions when teachers acknowledged their interests in classroom contexts. 'P' *'had a couple of really good teachers who noticed my interest in things'*. Laura remembered a drama teacher who would *'bring in familiar reference points to help me with whatever it was we were learning'*.

The powerful connection between intense interests and wellbeing extended beyond school. For Avery, interests provide *'a necessary part of being healthy'*, offering *'an opportunity to flex my mental and physical muscles, to escape from the pressures of allistic society, to engage in a mode of thinking that is highly compatible with my neurotype'*. Others echoed these positive sentiments, suggesting that passionate interests are a key component of autistic wellbeing but often neglected in schools. Ben, a recent school-leaver, reflected: *'If I was allowed in the social context to express my interest ... and really share it, then I would have absolutely loved that. I don't think I did it for school'*.

## Literacies and ruling passions

For these participants, literacies and intense interests were entangled in complex ways. In this section, reflections are organised under four heuristic headings.

### Reading/books as ruling passions

Several participants identified reading as a passion, independent of topic. They talked of a deep love of reading, noting how reading occupied a lot of their time. Some participants were particularly early readers. 'P' was a *'very, very early reader, like a voracious reader ... would just take in absolutely everything'*, *'one of the people who would read the cereal packet: absolutely anything and everything!'*. Robert remembered that *'... I would stay up with a torch under my covers and I would set my alarm for half past five so I could start reading earlier on in the day'*. Ashley reflected that *'reading really, as a child, was probably my main interest. I was a stereotypical bookworm and I would get six library books out in a week and read them all'*. As a child, Catharine would *'just take myself away with my books and sit and read for ages'*. This interest in reading did not cease with childhood; many participants talked about reading appetite in the present. Robert stated *'to this day I will read books literally hundreds of times, the same book over and over and over again ... I'll read maybe three or four books a week easily.'*

Many participants read non-fiction and fiction, a finding that conflicts with the AQ (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001). Robert, who read *'mostly fiction'*, commented *'it makes me laugh when you read, oh yeah, autistic people only read factual information'*. Graham recalled that *'by the time I went to university I'd probably read about half of the books in [small town] Library because they didn't have that many ... They had about 150 science-fiction books and so once I'd read all of those I had to branch out a bit'*. Catharine noted how her focus had changed over the years: *'I went through a period of never reading any fiction ... but then suddenly in probably the last four years I've actually managed to sit down and read some fiction and enjoy it ...'*

Some participants expressed a focus on the materiality of specific books. MEJ recalled *'a copy of Christmas Carol that I bought when I was nine on a trip to London and I used to read it to myself every Christmas'*. When the book was lost and his parents tried to replace it, *'they didn't buy me the same copy ... It's not the same book. I don't want anything to do with it!'*. Catharine talked about collecting books as objects, describing *'a collection of books on specific serial killers that I will always keep'* and *'a huge collection of children's books, again, 60s, 70s ... They've got amazing illustrations in them, it's so beautiful'*.

### Narrative and characters as a ruling passions

Again, contrary to restrictive notions of literacy related in the AQ (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001), literacies for several participants involved engagement with story and characters. As well as books, a broader understanding



of texts as 'multimodal artefacts' (Pahl, 2007, p. 87) enables us to see that the consumption and generation of stories around films, television, games, videogames and other media also shaped participant's experiences of literacies.

Kate recalled *'reading novels in lessons because I was bored ... and I would take myself off at break times to read'*. Ben described his passion for narrative and story via the *'tabletop role-playing game' 'Dungeons and Dragons'*. He explained *'I really enjoy it because I enjoy the narrative, the telling the story both as a player and then also running games myself ... I am regularly either thinking about a new character concept, thinking about where I want to take the campaign story ...'*. He talked about assigning characters *'personality'* and *'motive'*, linking with his earlier love of Lego, which often involved *'imagining, in my head, the story'* associated with his play.

Literacies related to on-screen play were also significant for some participants. Emma noted *'I've not read a book since 2019'*, expressing preference for *'interactional'* videogames. Citing *'Monster Hunter'* as a particular passion, they described enjoyment in *'getting lost in a fantasy or another world'*. Here, character play helps them attain a *'comfortable'* state with *'clear thoughts'*, rather than the *'loud and illegible'* thoughts they sometimes experience.

Fiction also served wider purposes than enjoyment of stories. Laura, who linked her ruling passions closely to the *'hyperfixation'* associated with ADHD, outlined an interest in *'very specific ... characters from TV programmes ... I'll always be really interested and passionate about media and film but characters and stories I'll go really deep ...'*. Her *'enthusiasm for rewatching things'* helped her *'understand story and narrative quite well'*. Here, the *'repetitive'* nature of the interests, described in the diagnostic manual as *'restrictive'* (APA, 2013), is reframed positively as a means of gaining knowledge. She recalled educational benefits: *'when I was doing GCSE drama I would know the scripts to films because I'd watched them so many times ...'*.

Narratives were also a way of making relational sense of the world. Laura described how she would *'always relate things to certain films'*. Similarly, 'P' recalled *'very early on, before I developed the tools of observation and analysis ... I was using people in literature ... so I was thinking, oh this person is like this book that I've read, so I was sort of parsing meaning in terms of these fictional worlds that I was experiencing'*. For MEJ, reading stories was how he *'learnt to recognise different registers early on and the details in people's speech'*. He cited this as a foundation for understanding social relationships, enabling him to *'work with people'*.

Fictional characters were also discussed in emotional terms. Ian recalled a strong childhood bond with a specific on-screen character. He explained that *'the only hero I had was the Lone Ranger. He was the only sort*

*of superhero that I had to look up to'*. His *'lonely'* experience of childhood meant he *'spent a lot of time in my head ... I think it's a big reason why we develop these special interests, because other people will not interact with us'*. He recounted the intensity of his connection with the character by describing the impact of watching a film adaptation, as an adult: *'the hero rode in on the white horse Silver to save the universe. Wow! I was four again. It was just an astonishingly physical experience ... that sort of moment of catharsis ... it astonished me'*.

### Literacies about ruling passions

Many participants referred to literacies linked to their other interests. In several cases, this involved a desire to know as much as possible about a topic. Catharine and Kate talked about reading books about their interests *'from cover to cover'*. MEJ remembered *'when I started learning the guitar, I read all the books, not just about how to play guitars, but who made guitars, where they were made, what the types of materials were ...'*. Talking about her love of the band Manic Street Preachers, Catharine recalled *'collect[ing] as many magazines like NME and Melody Maker ... to learn more and gain details from interviews ...'*. Others pinpointed aspects of interests linked to enjoyment of literacies. Ben recalled *'really enjoy[ing] reading stories of [lifeboat] rescues'*. Kate's interest in cooking meant she *'read cook-books for enjoyment'*. Robert shared this love of cook-books – he would *'read a cookbook beginning to end'* but had never followed a recipe! Reading autobiographies and accounts of climbs was an integral part of Robert's interest in rock climbing.

In some cases, interests crossed fiction and non-fiction categories, and encompassed multiple genres and kinds of text. Kate recounted the literacies around her teenage interest in vampires: *'I went through a phase of reading lots of books about vampires, I think after watching Bram Stoker's Dracula ... and Interview with a Vampire, so I took books out of the library all about myths about vampires and folklore as well as fiction books'*. This fluidity of engagement across different types of text demonstrates that reading about interests is not always *'reading for information'* in the narrow sense sometimes assumed.

Some participants traced the origin of a passion back to a specific text. For Graham, a lifelong interest in sound was sparked by *'a very strange book about musique concrete'* in a library. Similarly, Ian recalled being inspired by *'one of these series that have a thick black and orange and something stripe on the cover ... and it was introducing philosophy ... once I'd read that, that was it ... I really never looked back'*. Kate recalled how she *'used to love reading those 'big book of questions and*

*answers' books, especially the science sections', which 'fed into my adult life whereas as a teenager I loved biology ... and then went on to study biomedical science at university'.*

Other interests involved practice-specific texts which participants engaged with in ways that reflected their individual neurodivergent dispositions. Ben described the strong sensory appeal of a visual text, the London Underground map, due to *'the neatness, the logic, the aesthetic of the map ... the smoothness and the aesthetic'*. 'P' made links with reading music. They described how their *'perceptual span is very large, so I take ... textual information at a really fast rate and that bleeds into music as well ... I have a particular strength in sight reading because of the kind of similarities between music reading and textual reading'*.

### *Ruling passions, literacies and identities*

For many participants, ruling passions and associated literacies were entangled with their identities. As 'P' articulated, *'the autistic identity comes with special interest for me ... because I've sort of built my life around various obsessions'*. Some participants had a focused interest in autism as a subject and described engaging with this interest through reading and writing. As a result of this focus, and their own lived experience, several had jobs where they supported other autistic people or taught about autism. Solange talked about reading *'all the latest research in Autism'*, explaining that she has published work with others *'about autism in the BME community'*, while Ian blogged about his experience of being autistic. Robert described autism as one of his *'biggest interests'* since the age of 14. Working most of his life in jobs around autism involved *'reading about autism, thinking about autism, engaging with autistic people, watching YouTube, you know, just everything'*. As well as using writing to challenge *'the nonsense that most people think about autism'*, he talked eagerly about setting up new platforms to promote visibility of autistic perspectives. For Ashley, diagnosed later in life, realising that they were autistic involved *'finding an identity and reaching some self-acceptance'*. This led them to *'reading articles in newspapers and magazines ... listening to podcasts'* to learn more, eventually re-entering academia to study autism.

For others, experiences of gender and sexuality were intertwined with experiences of being autistic. For 'P', this meant an appetite for reading about LGBTQIA+ history. Avery identified *'linguistic evolution in minority spaces'* as one of their Spins. This involved *'figuring out the language to express my thoughts on my experience of autism and gender'*, recognising that *'both of these are minority experiences compared to the general population'* and that therefore *'the language is*

*lacking'*. They described how *'participating in discussions in online forums ... repeating those same interactions over and over, I get to try out different ways to express my thoughts on the topic of gender, how I experience it, how I relate to a society that doesn't really "get it" ...'*

### **Discussion and implications**

As we have seen, participants' reflections revealed several negative educational experiences, while the most positive related to engagement with passionate interests. It is logical, therefore, that integrating children's focussed interests into school contexts – and literacies teaching and learning more specifically – could help improve neurodivergent children's experiences of school. This has been suggested elsewhere (Wood, 2021), albeit generally rather than in a literacy-specific context. With this backdrop I make the following suggestions for practice around literacies, in response to the insights provided by participants. This is not a definitive set of guidance, but a starting point for developing classroom cultures that embrace neurodiversity via neurodivergent literacies.

### *Texts and identities*

Several participants reported feeling alienated at school. Research located in the pathology paradigm frames autistic children as needing 'social skills intervention' (Williams White et al., 2007).

However, embracing neurodiversity runs counter to the idea of normalising interventions for neurodivergent children. Work aligned with the neurodiversity paradigm re-frames this issue via the 'double-empathy problem' (Milton, 2012) which understands human interaction as a two-way process. Bullying experienced by several participants makes it clear which side of the relationship lacked empathy. Participants talked about enhancing their understanding of others by closely examining stories and characters, describing emotional engagement with such texts. Evidently, a character in a book or film will not demonstrate reciprocal (mis)understanding; for a neurodivergent child, characters are less threatening case-studies than hostile peers. Therefore, the data suggest that access to quality fiction could enable neurodivergent children to develop their understandings of personality, motive and relationships. This reflects long-standing work around NLS that illuminates how stories, and the 'cultural symbols' embedded within texts, are entangled with readers' identities (Dyson, 1996, p. 472).

With this in mind, schools need to invest in, and make visible, texts that reflect the (neuro)diverse population of the classroom, and the world beyond. When considering 'neurodivergent literacies', I identified the problematic constructions of neurodivergence in academic literature that arise from an absence of neurodivergent voices. This issue also applies to constructions of identity in children's texts. There is a growing number of books for children and young adults, written by neurodivergent authors, featuring neurodivergent protagonists. Using these texts in classroom teaching and learning through independent reading, shared reading, guided reading, and class story-times would enable neurodivergent children to see themselves depicted in stories. Several participants in this study talked about autism, and gender, as core aspects of their identities, so the inclusion of such texts for children from an early age would demonstrate appreciation of neurodivergent identities – in the same way that texts depicting racial diversity (and a range of demographic intersections) are essential in schools. Embedding texts featuring neurodivergent characters within classroom practice will not just benefit neurodivergent children; it brings opportunities for ALL children to learn about difference and disability. The only aspect of the AQ test with some accuracy, in relation to autism and literacies, was recognising the importance of libraries. Given the raft of UK library closures in the name of austerity, it is even more important that schools are well-stocked with a range of quality texts that represent all aspects of human diversity.

### *Developing and demonstrating specialist knowledge*

Participants talked passionately about their interests and the benefits these brought to their lives. Many talked of learning, enjoyment, escapism, love, deep engagement, and clarity of thought in relation to the literacies involved. This provides further justification for teachers to give children opportunities to develop and demonstrate specialist knowledge in subjects of their choosing. Of course, interests are not confined to autistic children, although the intensity of interest may be greater for them than some of their peers. Shaping learning around the interests of the child is not a new idea; such principles form the basis of excellent early-years practice (Chesworth, 2019). Similarly, Moll's (2019), p. 416 work around 'funds of knowledge' highlights the importance of drawing on children's own interests and 'lifeworlds' in ways that are 'pedagogically productive'.

In this study, many participants expressed a love of books. Several others preferred multimodal texts such as film and videogames, and others talked about engaging with online texts, and I outlined earlier how 'neurodivergent literacies' are also multimodal literacies. I suggest that embracing neurodiversity in classrooms also means enabling children to engage with the consumption and creation of multimodal texts in various forms. Encouraging children to bring their own interests into class as a basis for (multimodal) reading and writing, providing children with the means to develop this knowledge, affords huge scope for literacies teaching. Furthermore, giving children opportunities to share their interests in safe and supportive environments will help strengthen the neurodiverse classroom population. Such sharing can generate emotional connections between pupils, as well as enhance relationships between pupils and teachers. In the words of bell Hooks (2014), p. 155 'When we bring our passion to the classroom, our collective passions come together, and there is often an emotional response'. Several participants recalled difficult relationships with teachers, but commended teachers who had recognised and validated them through their ruling passions. Ashley, now a teacher themselves, reflected that '*one of the main ways that I connect to my autistic students is by finding out their special interests ...*'.

### *Teachers' critical literacies*

Skerrett (2010) suggests that there is a link between the teaching of critical literacies and social justice. Building on this, I suggest that it is vital that teachers' own critical literacy skills are fully informed by the latest thinking on topics relevant to those in their care. Teachers are bombarded with advice about 'best practice' from multiple sources, especially concerning students whose learning profiles are not 'typical'. To navigate this advice, teachers must harness their own critical literacy skills to challenge deficit models of difference and the pathology paradigm. I have demonstrated how tools such as the AQ frame difference in regressive ways, yet they maintain an authoritative grip on policy and practice. Indeed, the AQ is one of many documents circulating around educational institutions, shaping the perspectives of adults who work with children. However, if equipped with understanding of neurodivergent literacies and their underpinning concepts, teachers will be better placed to challenge problematic ideas around neurodivergence and to ensure that their classroom practice builds on principles aligned with social justice.



## Conclusion

Just as autistic 'special interests' are more complex than is suggested by pathology-paradigm framings, so are the literacies involved. Participants revealed multiple motivations and nuanced engagement with a variety of texts at different life stages, showing that literacies served many complex functions. This will be no surprise to autistic people themselves but may be illuminating for those whose understandings of autism are shaped by the dominant pathology paradigm. The data presented in this paper demonstrate clearly that the pervasive, limited (and limiting) framings of autistic people's literacies, such as in the AQ, have misrepresented how autistic (and other neurodivergent) people engage with texts. Taking a critical literacies approach to typically medicalised framings of identity can challenge pathologising interpretations of experience. Going forward, it is imperative that we expand our understanding of neurodivergent literacies, stimulating research and practice that works to counter deficit-model notions of disability and improves the experiences of children who do not align with what society currently deems 'typical'.

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## Conflict of interest statement

None.

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