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# ‘Unflattening’ Disabled Children’s Childhoods: Social Fiction as an Ethical Methodology for Exploring Neurodiversity in Educational Spaces

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## Abstract

This paper presents a methodological reflection on the use of social fiction as a means of ‘unflattening’ disabled children’s educational childhoods. I argue there is a critical need for new ways of exploring the lived experiences of neurodivergent and disabled children to complicate ‘flat’ understandings that deny the embodied, affective, socio-spatially mediated experience of school life. I do this by making a case for social fictions as an ethical methodology and reflecting on techniques I used in developing a short story social fiction. I make the case for why and how fiction-based methods destabilise dominant ways of knowing, seeing, teaching, and intervening with disabled children. I conclude by offering a series of ‘what if’ questions about the future development of social fiction as a methodology in Disability Studies in Education, one which brings greater nuance and a sense of three-dimensionality to understandings of neurodivergent bodies and minds in school spaces.

## Keywords

disability studies – childhood – social fiction – ethics – social justice – neurodiversity  
– disability studies in education – education

## 1 Introduction

This paper presents a methodological reflection on the use of social fiction as a means of ‘unflattening’ disabled children’s educational childhoods. I argue there is a critical need for new ways of exploring the lived experiences of neurodivergent and disabled children in educational research as a means of complicating ‘flat’ understandings that deny the embodied, affective, socio-spatially mediated experience of school life. I do this by making a case for social fictions as an ethical methodology. I then move to reflect on some of the techniques I used in my own experimental development of a short story as a piece of social fiction. I make the case for why and how fiction-based methods destabilise dominant ways of knowing, seeing, teaching, and intervening with disabled children in educational spaces. I conclude by offering a series of ‘what if’ questions about the future development of social fiction as a methodology in Disability Studies in Education, one which brings greater nuance and a sense of three-dimensionality to understandings of neurodivergent bodies and minds in school spaces.

*If Walks Could Talk* is a fictional short story set in a primary school. It was written as the result of several years’ work across a number of projects including fieldwork in a primary school, a study of autistic children’s and families’ experiences of education during Covid-19 (Pluquailec and O’Connor 2022a), the Right to Review project exploring parents’ views of recent UK SEND reforms and public consultation process (Pluquailec et al. 2023, 2025), a Critical Discourse Analysis of the UK Government’s Green Paper for those SEND reforms (Pluquailec and O’Connor 2023), as well as my regular learning in my work as a lecturer on postgraduate courses across the subjects of autism, disability studies, and education. Whilst most of these distinct projects had their own aims, data, and outputs, the cumulative learning has led me regularly to question how best to write about the everyday affective mundanities of being known as a disabled and (most frequently) neurodivergent child in the English school system. Notwithstanding the more traditional publications arising from the above projects, and the less conventional and more accessible outputs such as the comic strip (Pluquailec and O’Connor 2022b) and digital collection of pupils’ artworks (Pluquailec and O’Connor 2022c), I have long sensed that I needed to do something more, or something different, to attend to the questions and affective experience of researching within the field of disabled children’s education. My late-night worries, fieldwork daydreams, analytic frustrations, and gut feelings amounted to more than a matter of writing style or genre of research outputs. They were acts in the process of reconceptualising (for myself) what it is possible to

*do* and to *know* in research – and as such were matters of both ontology and epistemology. As a result, both the short story and this paper conceive of writing *as* inquiry (Richardson 2000) and social fiction as the methodology of that inquiry.

In this paper, I use the term methodology not to imply that social fiction is a tool for data collection or analysis, but to signal its role as a generative mode of inquiry and knowledge production. This distinction is important. Social fiction, as I conceptualise it here, is not the product of coding data into narrative form, but rather a way of inhabiting theoretical and empirical tensions through story. The intention of the story *If Walls Could Talk* is to bring to life the visceral and affective atmosphere of being with/in primary education in contemporary times. It is written from the perspective of The Walls of the school's classrooms and corridors in order to position the institution and the curriculum, laid bare on those walls, at the centre of the story. In much literature, the lived experience of being a child, a neurodivergent child, a disabled child, a child with SEND, in a school and in a classroom, is commonly narrated as an individual experience. These narratives tend to be dominated by an interest in social and cognitive functions, achievements and attainments, outcomes and life chances. *If Walls Could Talk*, instead, reminds us that the imagined individual child is one of many within an institution, within a specific place and space with its own histories, communities, and mundanities. The material of these mundanities is perhaps exemplified by The Walls and their carefully crafted displays of curriculum and achievement which enable and constrain particular ways of being, or becoming known, with/in those walls. To support the lines of thinking in this paper and bring to life *If Walls Could Talk*, what follows is an extended extract of the story:

There's a bubble of energy as the children goggle like a brood of ducklings from their tiny chairs to the scratchy patch of carpet in front of the glowing static screen. I look on from a distance, peering from my peeling magnolia surface through the snippets of ripped display paper that covers every inch of me. I'm proud of my work, sorry, the children's work, their efforts adorning my surfaces, on show – so neat, so carefully instructed. Ofsted<sup>1</sup> are going to marvel at me, in all my glory, a tribute to all that is good and great about education. I do sometimes wonder if I'm

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<sup>1</sup> Ofsted is the 'Office for Standards in Education and Children's Services and Skills', a government department responsible for the inspection and regulation of education and childcare services in the UK.

a little too serious, as I watch the children shuffle and giggle on the carpet over there. They don't seem to notice me anymore, once the novelty of seeing their work displayed for the first time wears off.

'Time for our big spelling test. Have you all been practising?' Miss Pontefract warmly encourages.

My gaze is drawn to the edge of the carpet area where Luca's tiny body curls around the whiteboard on his knee. He struggles to negotiate the balance on knobbly knees whilst positioning the big marker pen in his small grip. He wiggles his body closer to the child next to him, dragging his spiky cushion awkwardly underneath him. He squints and peers closely as he forms the letters from the board, darting his glance from the screen to his own writing and back again, seemingly finding it tricky to work out if they match.

'Are you alright there Luca, what's the matter?' Miss Pontefract asks, straining her neck to look over to where Luca wriggles.

'Can you take him to do a job?'. She leans to ask Miss Hornby. 'He's getting really stressed. He didn't have a snack with him earlier.'

Luca wearily trails behind Miss Hornby, clutching books to take back to the library. He moves slowly and without an ounce of energy in his small frame. Miss Pontefract seamlessly pulls a wrapped brioche roll from her desk drawer and slips it amongst the pile of books in Luca's arm as he leaves.

'Right, back to your desks, and get ready for the first spelling' Miss Pontefract rallies with enthusiasm.

Luca trots back into the room with a spring in his step and light in his eyes. He builds a fort around his laptop with books and pencil trays, hunkering down away from the adult body next to him. As question one is read out, a hush falls on the room save for the gentle patch and scrub of rubbers and gliding pencil tips. A cheer from the classroom next door pierces the serious silence of the test. There are concentrating faces and Faces everywhere in the room are tense with concentration and worried expressions as far as the eye can see. I see more of these kinds of faces

now than I have in all my time on these walls. Crumpled noses and furrowed brows are part and parcel of little faces these days, intense and in the depths of trying so very hard. Nervous glances dart to see who is still writing. A playful hum is quickly followed by a ripple of shushing from other children.

Luca's eyes wander to my surface with an interest no one has shown me in some time. Miss Hornby notices and gives Luca a gentle tap on his arm. He flinches, his attention snapped back, pulling his elbow back inside the boundaries of his fort.

My attention too is snapped back into the room. The test is over before I've even had chance to listen. Answers are swapped as the children provide large ticks and crosses on each other's work. There's a hum of frustrated grumbles and excited squeals.

Luca brings his laptop to show Miss Pontefract. 'Am I going to be impressed?', she asks, smiling warmly.

'Yes very.' He bounces while she looks, rocking back on his heels and pointing his toes sharply. He's small and wiry. Just a dot.

How happy are you to have finished English for the week?

'Very.' He grins widely, nodding his head vigorously. He bounces quietly up and down alongside other children while Miss Pontefract gives class instructions. There's a satisfaction in the thud as his heels repeatedly meet the flimsy floor and send vibrations through the joists. I feel like I can see it vibrating back through his bones. My tired pin-marked frame longs to peel away and bounce along, limbs flailing. Longs to feel the compression in my toes and the joyous release as my organs defy gravity before quickly compressing again. The acceleration of air sharply leaving my lungs, throwing my insides out in the world for everyone to feel the vibrations of my enthusiasm and excitement. I feel it.

'Stop bouncing or you'll miss IT.' An adult voice snips. No one else feels it. But I do.

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The intended audience for this paper includes researchers in disability studies and education, including those interested in policy and practice influence. While the paper contributes to academic conversations about childhood, disability, and the politics of knowledge production, the story it contains is addressed more directly to those who live and work alongside children in educational spaces and a broader interested public. The story is not offered as a resource or a tool for teacher professional development, but as an invitation. It asks readers to slow down, to dwell in ambiguity, to sit with feeling and contradiction, and to engage with neurodivergent childhoods in ways that unsettle habitual ways of knowing. It is written in the hope that it might stir thought, provoke discomfort, or spark new relational and ethical possibilities whether that be in research inquiry or school educators reflection on practice. The story, in printed paperback form, has been circulated to every primary school in a northern city of the UK with the invitation for it to be left on staff room coffee tables. The intention here has been to allow the book and its spreading to be less prescriptive and utilitarian than other texts that might enter a school space.

There are entire fields of study dedicated to means and modes of how research can, or should, influence educational practice and policy. Instead, the intention with this small book, 21 pages in length and barely bigger than a holiday postcard is to allow it a life of its own, finding its way between staffrooms and hands, relying on nothing more than the allure of a small book cover or word of mouth as modes of dissemination. This approach in itself is an act of resistance to the pinning down of knowledge production in relation to neurodivergent childhoods, and a proliferation of that knowledge being confined to the academy or those who can access it. My thinking here is informed by zine culture (Duncombe 1997) and the French clandestine presses of the resistance whose texts diffused the centrality of single dominant narratives and relied on the passing of papers between hands and communities.

## 2 Embodiment, Affect, and School Spaces

Central to this paper and its story is a recognition that neurodivergent and disabled children's experiences are shaped by an interplay of spatial, affective, and sensory dimensions. Embodiment is not simply a state of being, but an unfolding process that happens in time, space, and relationally (Turner 1994). Bodies, disabled or otherwise are not only lived, they are living, never complete nor singular (Paterson and Hughes 1999). As such, I understand bodies

as story-tellers in themselves: expressive, sensing, and storied, without the prerequisite for language or behaviour making experience legible (Smith 2016).

Policies that allude to particular modes of inhabiting the body are part of the mainstay of being in a school. Children are expected to be 'calm' (see for example the Department for Education 'Behaviour in Schools' guidance, 2024) and increasingly, 'silent' (see for example the much-debated 'Michaela Method', Birbalsingh 2020<sup>4</sup>). Such policies often misrecognise or ignore the experience of living in a body as bad behaviour, evidence of pathological deviance, or poor classroom management on the part of the teacher. The prickle of heat, the attentional pull of muscles and limbs, the excitement of physical, emotional, or cognitive stimulation or the discomfort of bodies in close, sweaty proximity are absent presences in educational policy, instead actively seeking to educate children towards the suppression of affective desires and impulses. Schools are not a neutral backdrop but a dense sensory field (Procter 2013). Sensations accumulate and interact with emotional, social, temporal, and spatial dynamics, contributing to a saturated affective environment that is rarely acknowledged in education research, policy, nor practice. The story narrated by *The Walls* foregrounds these details not as background noise but as central to how bodies inhabit, resist, and make meaning within institutional space. While the story unfolds within the physical and institutional boundaries of the school, this location is not presented as a limit, but as a specific social, cultural, and material site of childhood. By attending to the sensorium via the school walls, I aim to make a case for a shift in focus away from abstracted notions of 'special educational needs' or children's behaviour toward a more embodied, material, and affectively charged understanding of what it means to be in school, particularly for those whose ways of being fall outside normative expectations.

These theoretical commitments ground the methodological and political move I now turn to: the centring of embodiment as a means of resisting the flattening effects of educational policy and research about neurodivergent children's lives. In this paper I build on my previous work to make a case for the bringing in of emotions, affect and bodies to research about disabled (and specifically neurodivergent) children's educational childhoods. I do this to counter the disembodiment that prevails in educational policy and practice, a phenomenon I term 'flattening'. Flattening here is the collapsing of fleshy, flailing, snotty, energetic, vital bodies into collections of pathologies, behaviours, diagnoses and special educational needs. It is a product of the developmentalist logic as the panacea of education's evidence base which drives the policies and practices (Burman 2016). Such logic, that education should

centre around a conceived normative progression through developmental stages of an individual's cognitive and physical capacities, readily transforms children's experiences of living in their bodies into deviances in educational trajectory (Pluquailec 2022). This flattening occurs in the shorthand by which educational policy and practice make certain bodies knowable, with real material consequences for children in school spaces on a daily basis. One of the most dominant means of flattening bodies and minds of disabled children is in the abstraction of their daily lives into 'special educational needs'. Such flattening comes out of and plays into the dominant means of knowledge production about what it means to be seen, known, and understood as disabled. In this way, flattening both reflects and reinforces dominant epistemologies about what it means to be seen, known, and understood as disabled.

Embodiment, which I use to counter flattening, has deep roots in Disability Studies. For example, the 'staring encounter' illustrates how disabled bodies are perceived and interpreted within cultural contexts, highlighting the need to move beyond superficial or disembodied representations (Garland-Thomson 2009). In the context of schools as institutions central to children's social and cultural worlds, this perspective is crucial. Schools tend to perpetuate normative narratives that overlook embodied existence (Youdell 2015) and nowhere more so than for disabled pupils. I will argue that a methodology of social fiction addresses the sensory and affective experiences of disability in school spaces, challenging these normative narratives.

As I have explored elsewhere, where emotions in relation to neurodivergent children do get attention in educational research, policy, and practice, they are cast as individual, interior capacities and deficits in need of intervention, far removed from the embodied, visceral, rich affects of children living in their bodies in classrooms, corridors, and playgrounds (Pluquailec 2018, 2022). They are flattened. Instead, I approach emotions as socio-spatially mediated and articulated, rather than as purely internal, individual mental states (Bondi et al. 2005, 3), focusing on emotions as situated in bodies, shaped by places, and emerging through the relations between them. A turning to emotions framed in this way counters the disembodied discursive practices by returning our gaze to bodies that are lived in, in all their messy glory.

This allows for the consideration of the dynamic between emotion and power and the influences of the structures of schooling (Procter 2013, 497).

The embodied, affective experiences of living with/in education are rarely seen or heard, due to the oppressive structures of ableism that infuse the curriculum and ideology of schooling writ large. In both the story itself and this paper, I write against these structures by using a more critical and

empathetic lens to allow for new ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling alongside these children. In a deeply stratified education system that disciplines both children's and adults' bodies and ways of being in the world, I argue that social fictions can offer a means for educators to imagine otherwise. There is a rich tradition of using the arts to engage in thinking with and about disability. This tradition is tightly woven with disability arts and activism too numerous to attempt to do justice here; instead I quietly reference Karen Sheader's (2021) song *No Place Like Home* and the archival work of *On Whose*.

Shoulders (n.d.) to acknowledge the ongoing urgency of calling new worlds into view for disabled children and adults alike.

Focusing on emotions requires both the representational and analytic means to do so. In this regard, (MacLure 2013) discuss:

that which resists analysis... In place of the cerebral comforts of ideas and concepts, or as well as these, we could acknowledge those uncomfortable affects that swarm among our supposedly rational arguments – moments of nausea, complacency, disgust, embarrassment, guilt, fear and fascination, that threaten to undo our certainty and self certainty, by, again, allowing bodily intensities to surge up into thought and decision making. (p. 172)

The turn to affective intensities grapples with many of the kinds of embodied experiences I have had in fieldwork encounters, data analysis, and research writing. Here, I am mindful of Stewart's (2020) call to attend to affect in a way that "tries to slow the quick jump to representational thinking and evaluative critique long enough to find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects that fascinate because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us" (p. 4). In line with Jones and Holmes' (2015, n.p.) suggestion to resist "the suspicion of a creative analysis," which often leads to a "sedated response," I turned to fiction to "touch the gut of the affect." A sedated response typically involves a single, tidy explanation with coherent coding of emotions, behaviours, causes, and effects. In contrast, the creative analysis of the social world, in my case by turning to social fiction, reconnects us with the affect generated within and between spaces and bodies in school buildings. The Paper Boat Collective (Pandian and McLean 2017) emphasises that quick, digestible explanations such as those offered by traditional approaches to educational research of neurodivergent childhoods can betray the complexity of reality, committing an injustice by glossing over the nuances and details that do not neatly fit. They argue that true fidelity to the 'real' involves acknowledging its excessive

nature, where any account we provide will inevitably fall short (pp. 22–23). Research is always an act of storying whether explicitly or not. As Watson (2011) reminds us, the transparent representation of data is itself a fiction. The imperative to counter this flattening to better attend to socio-spatial emotions led me towards the affordances of fiction in incremental ways. This explicit turn to the arts as the means of both doing research and writing about research in the world brings into closer alignment an epistemology and ethics (and resultant methodology) of exploring disabled and neurodivergent children's educational childhoods.

### 3 Enter Social Fiction: Unflattening Through Story

I now move to set out a case for the use of fiction in educational research about disability. It is a case that I have been slowly building and cultivating over several years whilst grappling with issues of representation, ethics, justice, and voice in my work. This grappling came to fruition during and beyond a period of ethnographic school fieldwork where I was continuously bewildered by what to 'do' with what I had seen, learned, sensed, felt, and been party to during my time within the school walls. My subsequent development of a fictional short story came about as a tentative resolution of these troubles, a resolution that will never be wholly satisfactory but for which I now make a case.

Fiction has a relationship with research that stems from work in a number of disciplinary interests and has been conceived in various guises with overlapping and distinctive features, some of which I will outline. Education fiction (Hrastinski 2023), narrative fiction (Clough 2002), fictional-critical writing (Bolton 1994), narrative construction (Barone 2001), social science fiction (Gerlach and Hamilton 2003), and social fictions (Leavy 2009) are just some of the many ways researchers have gone about bringing fiction into overt conversation with research. All of these approaches have an underlying commitment to the utility of fiction but they vary in the degree to which they commit to deploy fiction as opposed to non-fiction scholarly work – or, as Bridges (2017) describes it, the degree of closeness or 'magic' of "the real" (p. x).

For example, Bridges explores the sensitiveness of fiction based on "what really, really happened" (p. 261), as distinct from texts that are explicitly fictitious in their entirety. He asks if "the fictional narrative must always then be parasitic of the factual narrative" (p. 261), a proposition that presumes that

what really, really happened can ever be truly or faithfully represented in a narrative account.

By contrast, education fictions are more interested in the purpose and outcome of the use of fiction, for example to contemplate the future impact of current educational trends (Hrastinski 2023; Ross 2023; Selwyn et al. 2020). Hrastinski (2023) outlines the defining characteristics of education fiction as (amongst other things): it intentionally connects past, present, and future; it encourages reflection; and it is both speculative and informed (p. 516). Interestingly, Hrastinski declares that writing mastery is not a primary aim of education fiction, an aspect which perhaps sets this genre apart from other approaches where the literary integrity of the work is fundamental. The future-oriented perspective of education fictions is another distinctive characteristic, though Selwyn et al. (2020) assert that this cannot be prophetic, only provocative. Moreover, Hrastinski (2023) cautions that this orientation can only look to many possible education futures but nevertheless authors of education fiction point their readers implicitly or explicitly towards some futures as more conceivable than others.

The methodological genre within which this paper situates itself is social fictions, first coined by Leavy in 2009. This tradition is explicitly an arts-based research (ABR) method rather than a vehicle for representing otherwise qualitative data or for translating research findings into an accessible or literary form. Whereas education fiction may be seen as *complementary* to traditional educational research methods (Hrastinski 2023), social fictions can play a distinct standalone role in exploring and expressing the complexities of educational experiences. A sub-methodology within ABR is arts-based education research (ABER), which has the specific aim of improving educational policy and practice (Barone and Eisner 2012). Unlike more traditional education research, ABER embraces ambiguity and strives for less certainty. Here, fiction puts its own partiality on centre stage (Gilman in Tipper and Gilman 2020). "Declaring that one's work is fiction is a different rhetorical move than declaring one's work is social science" (Watson 2011, 396). Such a move orientates the reader as well as the writer: "providing a set of expectations carries with it certain responsibility on the part of the author" (p. 396). When the work is both social science *and* fiction it disturbs "the pact" between author and audience (p. 396). This matters in educational research, research about disability, and the SEND policy landscape where evidence or evidence-based practice often reigns supreme (Thomas and Loxley 2022) whilst simultaneously failing to fully account for disabled children's experience beyond deficit discourses. As Banks notes, "facts don't always tell the truth, or a truth worth worrying about... the emotional texture of experience often is what

interests me – the consequences of the facts in the lives of actual persons” (Banks 1998, 11). Challenging the very notion of ‘evidence’ as somehow factual, fiction disrupts dominant knowledge claims in helpful ways.

Verisimilitude is a criterion by which many non-traditional or alternative research methodologies measure themselves (Gibson 2021). Verisimilitude is less interested in evidence, fact, or reality, and more concerned with whether the version of the story-world feels to the reader like a possible reality (Leavy 2023, 9). This speaks to Bochner’s (2018) long-held call to “unfurl rigor” as the ground for both inquiry and writing. The rule of rigor, he tells us, ‘if there is to be one, should be pragmatic and literary not scientific, and qualitative researchers should feel obliged to turn life inside out and upside down, investigating what it means to be alive and to produce just societies’ (p. 359). Rather than aiming for generalisability in a conventional sense, the significance of any story lies in its capacity to resonate, to provoke recognition, and to evoke possibilities that are contextually and emotionally intelligible (Barone and Eisner 2012; Bochner 2018; Leavy 2023). In making a case for the purpose and practice of social fiction research, Leavy (2023) writes of the transformative power of fiction for both the reader and the writer:

Fiction draws us into new yet familiar worlds in which we might meet strangers or characters that serve as reflections of pieces of ourselves. Through the pleasure found in immersing ourselves in resonant story-worlds, the process of reading fiction can be transformative as is the process of writing it. Fiction is engaged. (p. 2)

For me, this rendering of fiction is more open than what is offered by education fiction’s functional or purposeful use of story. In Leavy’s rendering, fiction is world-making and deeply relational, it is an affective engagement with the world and with ourselves, and the author has a commitment to their readers as a result. Leavy goes on to consider what this means for the reader, ‘We read it differently too – with our defences down, with our emotions at the forefront, with a suspension of disbelief, and with the assumption that as a leisure time activity we are just as qualified to read it as anyone’ (p. 2). This is where, I argue, the potential of social fictions lies in relation to disability. Bolt’s concept of ‘critical avoidance’ (2012), further developed by Cheyne (2019), refers to a failure to acknowledge, a tendency to look away, and a hesitance to engage with disability. Fiction has the potential to destabilise these defences and disbeliefs about disability in productive ways. It brings possibilities not just for the chronicling and documenting of experience (which non-fiction writing may afford), but also for reimagining it (Leavy

2023). In this context, the author bears significant responsibilities. As Leavy (2023, 15) suggests, authors must consider how to disrupt dominant cultural narratives and myths, to create space for new ways of thinking and seeing.

On the potential of fiction's contribution to knowledge production, Banks (2009) writes: "When I want to evoke the emotional texture of a human experience for an audience I find the canons of social science writing aren't very productive" (p. 11). The addition of the 'social' to fiction is a nod to the explicitness of social fiction's unique space within both categories. In this sense, social fictions are imbued with additional responsibilities in ways that fiction for fiction's sake is not. Watson (2016) talks of the 'sociologist-novelist' who has:

the ability to take the immediate and everyday experience of a public and hold it under a microscope: question values, challenge social processes, and create a dissonance within the public's image of itself by employing a range of stylistic literary techniques in conjunction with sociological analysis. (p. 436)

I may here be undervaluing the power of fiction to further my case for social fiction in research. After all, as Saunders (2021) observes about some of the great Russian short story writers:

The Russians... regard fiction not as something decorative but as a vital moral-ethical tool... They changed you when you read them, made the world seem to be telling a different, more interesting story, a story in which you might play a meaningful part and in which you had responsibilities. (p. 3)

For me, the vital moral-ethical tool is one that brings the imperatives of sociological (or educational) research and fictional storytelling together in meaningful ways.

Tipper and Gilman (2019) identify another potential use for fiction, as a "[a] tool for thinking oneself into possible scenarios or futures and for exploring different ways of making sense" (p. 3). Each of these perspectives on the purpose and potential of fiction speaks to an ethics of social inquiry, specifically a responsibility to expand, disrupt, and reimagine our understandings of the social world.

#### 4 Ethical Techniques in Social Fiction for Disabled Childhoods

Moving from the why to the how, in the following section I detail some of the techniques I employed to produce the story and how they align epistemologically and ethically with the purpose of *If Walls Could Talk*. I do this to attend to the contexts that disability and childhood bring, with their particular ethics and risks, to the range of techniques that authors of social fictions have offered thus far (see for example de Freitas 2003; Leavy 2016, 2020, 2023; Watson 2011; Watson 2016, 2022). Following Saunders' (2021) advice, it was crucial to ensure that every detail I included in the story, whether of actions or inactions, served a purpose. Each one needed to matter. These techniques, discussed below, are not merely ornamental but are vital design elements that serve a heuristic purpose in this research approach (Barone and Eisner 2012).

##### 4.1 *Voice, Narration, and Representation in Stories of Disabled Childhoods*

Though the story is *about* school children, the decision not to write it from the perspective of children, nor with a child narrator, was deliberate and centred in the ethics and epistemology of representation and voice in research and in broader society. Both disabled people and children have had their voices marginalised in a society that deems itself able to speak on their behalf. There is a long history of activism and resistance to this silencing in the Disabled People's Movement, encapsulated in the long-held mantra "nothing about us, without us". Children's voices have been considered irrelevant in matters of their own lives, such as education, due to the dominance of developmentalist logic which holds that childhood is a stage of immaturity towards an eventual adult position of competency and authority (James and Prout 2015). Given the multiple disadvantaged social positions that disabled children find themselves in, it is vital to work to counter such blockades to self-representation. With that in mind, it would have been unethical to develop a story which claimed, or even feigned, to speak on behalf of disabled children. If I had chosen to represent my hand as author as that of a child or children, I would have been in ethically murky water, a water in which I do not wish to swim.

Authors of fiction may have fewer qualms about narrating children's voices, such is their craft, but the additional weight of responsibility on authors of social fiction, as I have already outlined, is pertinent to this decision. The epistemological issue of writing from the perspective of a child would have been in the individualising of experience. This would jar with my argument that schools are socio-spatial encounters where certain bodies are afforded less space than others to be known (Pluquailec 2018; Pluquailec and O'Connor

2022a). To narrate from any single child's (or even adult's) perspective would have run against the underlying principle that school experiences are deeply socio-spatial in character.

I have previously grappled with issues of authorship and voice in research about disabled children (Pluquailec O'Connor 2022) and so have often chosen to write autoethnographically to keep firm boundaries between *my* authorship as the person at the keyboard and the re-presentation I offer of any life lived, in recognition of the inherent power imbalance between the two. Here, I have chosen not to narrate my own positionality in the form of a discrete autobiographical account. This is not an omission, but a methodological and political decision that aligns with the broader concerns of the paper. To pin down the process of reflexivity to fixed identity categories risks repeating the very logics that this work seeks to unsettle. As Pillow (2003) argues, reflexivity can easily become a performance of transparency that serves the researcher more than the research. Similarly, Mazzei and Jackson (2012) critique the expectation that voice, including the researcher's own, should be coherent and locatable. In this work, my presence is diffused through narrative technique, framing, and form, rather than expressed through personal exposition. To provide particular legibility would be to assume that identity is stable, that reflexivity is singular, and that the researcher (and perhaps, reader) can be fully known. I take a different position, informed by post-qualitative and feminist scholarship, where reflexivity is partial, situated, and necessarily unfinished (Lather 2012). My voice is in the story and in the argument, but it is not pinned to a fixed authorial self.

Choosing The Walls as the narrator in this story is at once both serious and playful. As The Wall narrates in the prologue:

There's little I don't do or don't know. There's little that goes unseen by my many faces in many places, simultaneously everywhere and overlooked... Some might call me subversive simply because I go largely under the radar, day in, day out, yet I am everywhere, steadfast, day in day out, long before the first bell rings and long after the last.

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The Walls were the perfect narrator both of the space and the temporality of children and adults in schools. With policies enacted on its surfaces, The Walls are an enduring presence and witness to the long passage of time through short and chaotic school days. Narrating as The Walls removed the inherent risks of feigning the voice of a child, because a wall is not imbued with the requirement to be known in particular ways, as neurodivergent, or as

'having' SEND, or as a child. It also blurred the boundaries of the notion of protagonist which in any story 'of' disability runs the risk of "inspiration porn" (Young 2012). Instead, without a human narrator, the story allowed for multiple perspectives to be brought into view at any one time, none of which were the typical protagonists or characters one might expect of an everyday school story. By choosing a narrator that was neither adult nor child, researcher nor teacher, I sought to destabilise the potential hierarchies that may be typical in educational research and school-based writing.

Social fiction, and particularly the decision to narrate through *The Walls*, is one way to attune to the affective and sensorial registers of school life: the fizzy joy and fuzzy pain, the hungry, weary small frames of bodies at the end of a long school year, the playing field of scorched grass and lava-life tarmac of a playground in a heatwave. These fragments of the sensorium are neither aesthetic flourishes nor incidental, they are the very matter of (neurodivergent) life navigated in school, matter that is often flattened, or absent in educational discourse. Fiction offers a means of tracing a pulse through bodies, spaces, and relations.

Nevertheless, designating an inanimate object as narrator of the lives and bodies of disabled children is not without its risks. One of the central features of *The Walls*' personification is their deep sense of empathy with the children in the story. *The Walls* feel the intensity of living in the children's bodies, in the fibre of their being.

They attend to the many fleeting and often missed moments of children's experiences – moments which may seem inconsequential but have cumulative effects. Leavy (2016) and de Freitas (2003) urge us as authors to think long and hard on who is heard and who is silent in the stories that we tell. Nowhere is that more relevant than in a story of disability and childhood, given their historic social positions of disadvantage outlined above. I am acutely aware of the danger of implicitly and explicitly drawing parallels between the emotional worlds of an inanimate object and neurodivergent children. Potentially this device perpetuates a historical discourse of said children that dehumanises them and narrates their emotionality as non-human or in some ways deviant (see Botha 2021, for an overview of this grand narrative). To navigate this risk, I used one of the many literary techniques available in fiction writing to blur the boundaries of ownership between narrator and characters – free indirect discourse. This approach offers the means to give *The Walls* an internal life whilst signalling a valuing of bodies, behaviours, and ways of being that are often flattened or steeped in narrow interpretations of what it means to be a child in a school space. Instead, in melding the inner worlds of

The Walls and the school children, free indirect discourse emphasises attention to the unattended.

I am also mindful of my contribution to the swathe of research that stories oppression as the singularly defining feature of a particular community (see Tuck 2009, 413). This, perhaps, is one of the reasons I felt compelled to avoid naming diagnostic categories or peddling tired tropes about stereotypical representations of particular behaviours. Traditional qualitative research which relies on the words of participants often reproduces the flattening of neurodivergent children into their diagnoses, positioning them as knowable primarily through behavioural markers, intervention targets, or deficit logics (Smith 2016; Allan and Slee 2008; Goodley 2014). In contrast, this work aligns with neurodiversity-informed scholarship that resists the demand for legibility (Yergeau 2018). Through the social fictional deployment of *The Walls*, it was possible to reject much of the shorthand that qualitative research participants rely on to make themselves comprehensible and that the researcher then relies on to make their findings legible. I wanted *The Walls* to be able to offer multiple ways of seeing, knowing and understanding bodies, and potentially doing so in ways that often go unnoticed or ignored. I held tightly to Gordon's (2008) notion of "complex personhood" in which one respects the presumption that people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning" (pp. 4–5).

Steeping the story in affective language offered by literary practice, to capture the senses and the body (even a body that is a wall), was one way to bring richer dimensionality to the characters in the story – be it the purple flush of a teacher's face or the crumpled frame of a small, panicking child (Pluquailec 2024).

#### 4.2 *Stories as Always Multiple*

One of the greatest affordances of social fictions is the ability to pull at multiple threads at once, which is one of the devices I consider so valuable in the 'unflattening' of disabled children's bodies in school spaces. It could be argued that *If Walls Could Talk* is not, in fact, *about* disability nor a story of disability. It does not actually make any explicit reference to disability, impairment, or diagnosis.

Disability is invoked in my telling you it is invoked (within the book itself there is a one-page exegesis). In a countering to the flattening of disabled children as a collection of symptoms or behaviours, the story holds multiple social issues at once. It is at once a story of disability, but also of poverty and hunger, the climate crisis, current curricula initiatives and school funding gaps, all of which are pressing social issues in contemporary UK education

(see for example: BBC 2022; Child Poverty Action Group 2023; Schmuecker and Bestwick 2024; Sibieta 2023). The story becomes a world-making conversation between author, reader, and society, as Watson (2016) explains:

The sociologist-novelist creates the subjects and worlds, and the reader-interlocutor uncovers the research knowledge within it through the active process of reading and sense-making. The reader becomes more than just a consumer as they sift through the story and, if they see themselves inside it, tie their own personal issues and troubles to the character's troubles as well as the wider social issues of the novel world – and in so doing, are effectively cultivating a sociological imagination. (p. 443)

Part of that cultivating is a sense of place which I would argue is essential in thinking about disabled children's educational childhoods. In the sense of place I hoped to invoke in *If Walls Could Talk*, the pace of the story is important. Schools are busy, frantic, and often confusing and contradictory places. Each one is a microcosm, an ecosystem, with their own cultures and practices, rituals and rhythms. Yet there is something deeply familiar in a thick description of a school space (Sikes 2005), and literary techniques of pace proved useful to develop that thickness. The sense of place in this story sought to mimic the lack of coherence and overwhelming chaos many children experience in education. The narrative arc needed to splinter and fracture to resonate with the embodied intensity of the children's movements through such a chaotic yet highly regulated space, day in and day out. As *The Walls* remind us, in the school, as in life, everything is always happening all at once: "There's rarely a moment of nothingness in this place, always something to do, to fix, to break, to negotiate, and to care for" (Pluquailec 2024, 24). For those of us interested in more nuanced understandings of the everyday lives of neurodivergent children, the capturing of this intensity in a fictional space – and inviting readers into the space, be they teachers, school staff, parents, the general public – is a vital literary tool in complexifying both being and becoming known in the world.

### 4.3 *Aesthetics and Design Elements*

An important distinction between *If Walls Could Talk* and other research texts I have written is a focus on the aesthetics and material design of the artefact itself.

Unlike journal articles or academic monographs constrained by publishers' house-style guidelines and formatting, the production of this story as an arts-

based artefact allowed for the input of an artist in the dust jacket design. Aesthetics are important in the outputs of arts-based research methods because these approaches seek to connect with audiences in a more profound and emotional way (Knowles and Cole 2007). This was crucial to the principles of my route of inquiry – engaging readers in thinking about children's bodies in spaces more deeply. By further integrating the arts through design elements such as cover design and text layout, arts-based research can convey subtleties and stir emotions in ways that traditional scholarly formats might not (Barone and Eisner 2012). Here, I return to Leavy's (2022) argument that readers engage with fiction in a different, less defensive way than with other writing – more willing to suspend disbelief, and with a greater sense of their autonomy as readers to engage in interpretive acts. For this story to look and feel like a piece of fiction rather than an academic output was key to its integrity; after all, we all know you should judge a book by its cover.

#### 4.4 *Gaps and Unfinished Stories*

A feature of social fiction that is somewhat antithetical to qualitative methods is the use of deliberate, unfilled gaps. These gaps, which appear to leave words unsaid in the mouths of characters, plot lines half-finished, and conclusions undrawn, operate as a powerful unsettling of certainty. They are there to be filled by the reader through their own interpretive acts (de Freitas 2003) and imagination (Barone and Eisner 2016; Bolton 1994). In traditional qualitative research about disabled children, the role of writing is to leave as few gaps as possible, to demonstrate that the study findings are authoritative and rigorous. The role of the researcher is to have completed the interpretive acts fully and convincingly on behalf of the reader. The offering of unfilled gaps in fiction, then, is an opening to many possible interpretations, inferences, and conclusions by the reader, which I argue is an act of unflattening disabled childhoods in education. Where readers are able to take imaginative leaps from the words of the story to the spaces in between the lines, finding connections to their own lives, experiences, and persuasions, there is the potential for new worlds to come into view. The story ends abruptly. A single line, "It was too much for Junior", hangs in the air, leaving the reader without instruction about *what comes next*. The deliberately ambiguous ending serves the purpose of marking out the temporality of any and all school stories. Its openness reminds the reader of their responsibility for interpreting and digesting the story both during and after the act of reading – a story exists only in a fleeting moment but can linger in the imagination for some time. Even a story read by a single reader can provoke different interpretations and resonances when it is read a second, third, or fourth time. Returning

responsibility to the reader for *what comes next* allows a broadening of the stories it is possible to tell of disabled children's bodies in school spaces, allows a drawing in of the sociological imagination to an otherwise, a potential, a possibility of thinking or doing differently.

## 5 What Next For Social Fictions in Disabled Children's Educational Childhoods?

In this paper I have presented a case for why and how social fictions offer an ethical methodology for both Disability Studies in Education as a discipline and for the furthering of research about disabled children's educational childhoods. I demonstrated this case through an exploration of social fictions' affordances in the unflattening of the limiting traditional discourse about disabled children. I then offered my own reflections on the literary techniques I put to work in my own development of a fictional short story *If Walls Could Talk*, as I sought to address some of the dominant, longstanding ethical issues in research and publication about disabled children in education. The story is not designed to provide solutions, it is not a tool, a case study, or a prompt for best practice. It is an invitation: a speculative, sensory, and affective opening into a different kind of learning space. A space where discomfort, uncertainty, and relationality might guide how we think with and about disabled children. If this story circulates in staffrooms, training sessions, or classrooms, if it invites pause, sparks feeling, or provokes a shift in how someone notices a child, then perhaps it is doing the kind of work social fictions aim for. My goal was not to suggest that this story is in any way an exemplar of 'good' social fiction but to start a conversation about the potential of the methodology in DSE and beyond. So, what next? One avenue would be to begin to develop criteria by which we could assess the quality of fiction written in this sphere, but I would argue that that is a distant and arguably reductionist goal. Instead of aiming towards new disciplinary constraints, I am posing a series of 'what if' questions building on Barone and Eisner's (2012) ABR criteria, for the development of social fictions as a methodology in DSE. What if social fictions could illuminate what often goes unnoticed in school spaces? What if social fictions could be generative and yield new questions about thinking, working, and understanding the richness of disabled children's educational lives? What if the methodology can offer a verisimilitude to research creation that more traditional qualitative methods cannot? What if we developed social fictions as a means of unflattening descriptions (and understandings) of disabled children's education lives? Chekov said, "Art does not have to solve problems,

it only has to formulate them correctly" (Saunders 2021, 56). I conclude this paper by proposing that there is the potential for social fiction approaches in studies of disabled children's educational childhoods to aid these formulations.

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