

The School Experiences of Autistic Nonbinary Youth

Charlotte Brooks

Autism Centre for Education and Research, University of Birmingham.

<https://thegoo.se> [@thegoo.se](https://twitter.com/thegoo.se) CXB1058@bham.ac.uk

Introduction

Support at school may play a crucial role in enhancing the wellbeing of gender-diverse autistic youth (Greenspan et al., 2022). However, research into their experiences remains limited, particularly for autistic nonbinary young people (see review by Brooks, in press). This ongoing study qualitatively explored the **experiences of autistic nonbinary young people** who had recently left school, focusing on how their ability to 'be themselves' shifted across different spaces within the school.

Scan to read
later:



<https://thegoo.se/AEC-poster>

Methods

Participants

Participants were 10 autistic nonbinary young people from England who had recently left school (aged 18-21). See table below for characteristics:

Participant	Gender (as described by participant)	Ethnicity	Age at Autism Diagnosis	Other Neurodivergences
Artin	"somewhere between neutral and not there"	White	15	ADHD
Charlie	"Queer"	Black	14	ADHD
Eli	"Non-binary, gender queer, trans masc (ish)"	White	18	Not sure
Indigo	"Non-binary transfemme"	Mixed	20	ADHD
Jay	"Non binary"	Black	10	ADHD
Maeve	"'Genderfluid' and 'nonbinary' are the most accurate"	White	6	-
Pearly	"Non binary"	Black	13	Not sure
Ridley	"Non binary"	Black	12	Not sure
Rose	"Non binary"	Asian	13	-
Rowan	"Non binary genderqueer"	Asian	20	ADHD, dyspraxia, depression

Procedure

Participants created colour-coded floorplans of their schools to express how supported they felt in different spaces, which guided our interviews. Developing themes were identified through thematic analysis and are now being refined.

Research priorities

From a participatory project (Brooks, 2023)

1. Research should include a diverse range of people and experiences
2. Research should be community-led
3. Research should look at ways forward

Developing Theme 1

Belonging as Ourselves: "I don't need to think about being anything different"

In some spaces in school, participants felt free to be themselves without judgment—boosting their confidence and helping them connect with others.

I could just receive fresh breeze and...enjoy my own company
- Jay (outside)

You're a safe person to be weird around
- Eli (Art class)

The staff trusted my judgment
- Maeve (as student librarian)

The other people there were like me
- Artin (backstage Club)

Developing Theme 2

Expression on Hold: "They treat you like an alien"

In other spaces, fear of judgment forced participants to mask their identities and alter their behaviour to avoid harassment.

Everyone was looking at me being differently...not being into a category
- Charlie (group project)

Back then, it was very much doing everything for the sake of everyone else...I kept my head down so I didn't say the wrong thing
- Rowan (in class)

I felt a bit like a ghost following them around
- Rose (friendships)

Developing Theme 3

Empowering Learners: "We need people to be there for us"

Participants valued respectful, adaptable, and inclusive teachers who addressed diversity in their teaching.

There were a variety... everyone could use their talents
- Rose (SEN clubs)

She knew my story, and was very good at making me feel comfortable
- Jay (Art class)

They would always try... they didn't forget
- Indigo (at new school)

Developing Theme 4

Disconnected Learning: "You just have to struggle your way"

Participants were critical of teaching that undermined their autonomy, was inconsistent or highlighted their differences.

Some of the staff did it, some didn't
- Maeve (pronoun signatures)

I just don't want to be present. But you can't help it. You just need to be there
- Jay (assembly)

You won't just let me be
- Charlie (PE)

it's not like they would ask me what I'd want
- Indigo (breaktime)

Discussion

Experiences varied in spaces across school. Autistic nonbinary young people in our study thrived when **environments and staff respected their strengths, needs, and identities**. They struggled when they had to **mask to avoid judgment or when support was lacking**. This work informs the next phase of my PhD, which will gather teacher perspectives to inform practical strategies for supporting inclusion.

References

- Brooks, C. (2023) 'Exploring Views on Future Directions of Research Involving Nonbinary Autistic People Through Lived Experience'. *INSAR 2023 Annual Meeting*, Stockholm, Sweden, 4 May. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.24843.77605> (Accessed: 4 May 2023).
- Brooks, C. (in press) 'Growing Up Autistic and Nonbinary: Reflecting on the Experiences of Autistic Nonbinary Youth', in N. Keates and K. Waldock (eds) *Neurodivergent Education and Lifelong Learning*. New York: IGI Global.
- Greenspan, S.B. et al. (2022) 'Identified protective factors to support psychological well-being among gender diverse autistic youth', *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 20(2), pp. 407–440. Available at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2022.2119188>.

