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# An exploration of student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic learners

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**Abstract**

This research aimed to explore student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic learners. Adopting an ethics of care approach, this research was conducted with ten student teachers in a large college in North-East England. Participants (student teachers) were enrolled in a PGCE within the post-compulsory education sector. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and thematically analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework. The analysis indicated that although student teachers were positive in their attitude towards inclusion, they had some concerns over their ability to include autistic learners. The main external factors impacting inclusive practice with respect to autistic learners, identified by participants were time, resources, and support.

The recommendations do not address the external factors impacting inclusive practice with respect to autistic learners, for example, time, which cannot be solved through initial teacher education, however, there are changes that can be made to ITE programmes. The key recommendations from this study are the introduction of autistic guest speakers on the PGCE programme and collaboration with autistic people to develop its curriculum content to support future teachers feeling prepared to include autistic learners. Enhanced opportunities to interact with autistic learners through peer observations and further collaboration with mentors to support inclusive practice is also proposed through the development of Communities of Practice (CoP).

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Author's declaration

"I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution."

Printed Name: Lisa Fernandes

Signature:

**List of abbreviations**

| | |
|---|---|
| ASD | Autism Spectrum Disorder |
| EHCP | Education, Health and Care Plan |
| FE | Further Education |
| ITE | Initial Teacher Education |
| ITT | Initial Teacher Training |
| LA | Local Authority |
| LDD | Learning Difficulties and Disabilities |
| HE | Higher Education |
| PIS | Participant Information Sheet |
| PGCE | Post-graduate Certificate in Education |
| SEND | Special Educational Needs and Disabilities |
| SEN | Special Educational Needs |
| QTLS | Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills |
| QTS | Qualified Teacher Status |
| YPA | Young People and Adults |

## Chapter 1: Introduction and Context

For the past six years, I have been employed as a Programme Leader for the Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) for Specialists in Learning Difficulties and Disabilities in a college based higher education in the North-East of England. This dissertation topic was driven by my interest in how the PGCE programmes delivered in my department are preparing teachers for inclusion with particular respect to autistic learners. The term 'student teacher' is used throughout to refer to individuals enrolled on a PGCE programme working towards becoming a qualified teacher.

There are a variety of routes into teaching in England. In the compulsory sector Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) is acquired through completing either a Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree, a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree (BA/BSc) with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) or a Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) following a first degree. Other routes include school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT), the Registered Teacher Programme (RTP) or employment-based School Direct. These relatively new alternative routes of employment-based training have received mixed reviews from the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) inspections (Young, Hall & Clarke, 2007). All these programmes have both taught elements and practical work experience on placement. However, the 'experience' aspect of teacher education in schools, especially on one-year post-graduate routes, has been criticised and described as 'impoverished' as capacity for critical analysis of practice is often limited (Ellis, 2010).

The programmes offered at my organisation cater for people who aim to teach in the post-compulsory sector with learners aged 14-year-old and above. Getting qualified in the post-compulsory sector also has different routes and includes both post-graduate and under-graduate qualifications. However, the requirement to have a teaching qualification in this sector was removed following the 2012 Lingfield report (DfBIS, 2012), although it was recommended that teachers of English and maths and those working with learners with learning difficulties or disabilities should have specialist qualifications. To reflect this, on PGCE programmes at the college where I work, there are four different PGCE programmes from which to choose. These four specialist routes are: Young People and Adults, English Literacy and ESOL, Maths and Numeracy, and Learning Difficulties and Disabilities. Like other ITE programmes, it is organised with both academic and vocational elements. On completion of the PGCE, students can apply for professional formation through the Education and Training Society to gain Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) status. This gives them parity of esteem with schoolteachers and enables those

with QTLS to teach in schools. As a result, graduates from our programmes gain employment across a range of provision, including secondary schools, further education (FE) colleges, community education, pupil referral units and prisons.

### 1.1 A note on the use of language

Since the introduction of the term Special Educational Needs by Warnock (1978), which was a shift away from the categorisation of 'handicap', there have been various conceptualisations of terms used to describe and label individuals with diverse needs. We have seen changes in language from people first to disability first language (Dunn & Andrews, 2015) and many debates over how language influences perceptions of those with what might be seen as having additional or different needs (Cluley, 2018; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). To this day, individuals are still categorised. The most current descriptors from the SEND Code of Practice (2015) are defined as broad areas of need. These are: communication and interaction; cognition and learning; social, emotional and mental health, and sensory and/or physical needs. I will use the term Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) as this is the current phrase used in policy documents in England and not because I believe this is the best way of referring to learners with learning difficulties and disabilities. For one particular group of people, those with a diagnosis of autism, there have been many debates around language. For the purpose of this dissertation, the terms autistic and person on the autism spectrum will be used to reflect and respect the viewpoints of the autistic community, as identity-first language was found by Kenny, Hattersley, Molins, Buckley, Povey, & Pellicano (2016) to be the terms that the adult autistic community prefer. Where appropriate, the term neurotypical will be used when referring to people without a diagnosis of autism or any other neurological condition. To support the distinction between student teachers and their learners, I have used the term student teacher to refer to the research participants and the term learners to refer to those that they teach.

### 1.2 Research aims

My interest is in the student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards inclusion with particular respect to autistic learners. The relationship between attitudes and beliefs of teachers towards inclusion and inclusive practice is well documented and impacts on outcomes for learners (Park & Chitiyo, 2011; Segall & Campbell, 2012; Yu,

2018), and the acceptance of learners with disabilities has been closely linked to attitudes towards inclusion (Brownlee & Carrington, 2000). As student teachers will be instrumental in implementing policies related to the inclusion of autistic learners, an exploration of their perceptions of autism could lead to a greater insight into the issues surrounding implementation of inclusive policy and may result in a change in practice. This new knowledge could then support the department to develop approaches to teacher education to prepare teachers to work with autistic learners. This knowledge could be shared wider across Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers to enhance practice. Additionally, involvement in the research project may support reflection of the participants' own attitudes towards inclusion with particular respect to autistic learners and lead to learning and growth as a practitioner. It may also deepen their understanding of the research process, which may be useful when conducting their own research projects as part of their PGCE or future study programmes.

Within this study I aimed to answer the following research questions:

1) What are the student teachers' understandings of inclusion and autism?
2) What are the student teachers' attitudes towards including autistic learners?
3) What do student teachers consider as factors impacting on the inclusion of autistic learners?
4) What are the student teachers' opinions on how well the PGCE prepares them to support autistic learners?

In chapter 2 I will start with an outline of concepts of inclusion before moving onto discuss models of disability. I will then provide an overview of autism. A brief summary of the history of inclusive policy in education in England will be provided. This will be followed by sections on preparing teachers for inclusion and why autistic learners are at greater risk of exclusion. Chapter 3 will provide an exploration of ethics of care which will be used as a framework for this research. Chapter 4 will then move onto methodology and my own epistemological beliefs will be discussed before presenting my findings in chapter 4, discussions in chapter 5 and conclusions, contribution to practice, limitations, and further research recommendations in chapter 6.

# Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter will start by discussing concepts of inclusion and differing models of disability before moving onto presenting an overview of autism. A brief history of the development of inclusive policy will be followed by a review of the literature in relation to preparing teachers for inclusive practice. How autistic learners are more likely to be excluded will then be explored before reviewing the overall aims and research questions.

## 2.1 Concepts of inclusion

A complex history underpins the development of inclusive practice and the meaning of inclusion in education may be ambiguous due to its many interpretations. Lindsay (2003:6) suggests 'operationalising inclusion as a variable is a necessary step in the research process'. For this reason, it is important to explore what is meant by these terms within my own research. Inclusion, as a term, first began to be discussed in the 1990s as a reaction to the integration/segregation debate which focused mainly on whether children with special educational needs (SEN) should be educated in special or mainstream schools (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). Internationally and more recently it can be seen more broadly in terms of including and welcoming diversity in all its forms and improving participation in society for people who are disadvantaged in order to eradicate social exclusion (United Nations, 2016). As inclusion and inclusive education have been defined in a variety of ways there is not one agreed definition of inclusion in England (Norwich, 2014). Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou (2011) differentiate between broad and narrow definitions of inclusion. They suggest the inclusion of specific groups of students, usually those with SEND, into a 'mainstream' or 'regular' school as a narrow definition whereas a broad definition of inclusion focuses on the diversity of all learners. This correlates with Norwich & Nash (2011) who suggest inclusive education goes beyond a focus on SEND and state 'inclusivity is defined in terms of diversity of children'.

In the context of this research, inclusion starts with the idea that education is a basic human right (Ainscow & Miles, 2008) and is understood as a journey towards social justice, a 'never ending process rather than a simple change of state' (Ainscow, 1999:128). This is supported by Thomas & Whitburn (2019:162) who describe inclusive education as 'ongoing transformational change', however, they highlight the failings of education to be genuinely inclusive stating practice has not lived up to the ideology. They argue that

clarity around how inclusive policy is realised in practice has been difficult due to the many interpretations of inclusion.

### 2.2 Models of disability

There are various models of disability used in the SEND field to debate policy and practice. The terms 'medical model' and 'social model' of disability have frequently been used to illustrate opposing views of disability (Peer & Reid, 2016). The medical, deficit, or 'personal tragedy' (Swain & French, 2000:572) model sees impairment as a problem within the individual and looks to fix or correct the individual through professional intervention. This model has been criticised for being neglectful of the whole person and for treating individuals as problems to be fixed (Thomas & Woods, 2003:15). In the 1970s the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) group challenged how disability is viewed (Tregaskis, 2002). Stemming from this, the social model, introduced by Oliver in the 1980s to support professionals to understand disabling barriers in society (Oliver, 2013), differentiates between an impairment and a disability and sees disability as a social construct that can be changed (Hellawell, 2019). Since then, the social model has been a framework for disability theorists to demonstrate 'disability as a form of social oppression' (Goode, 2007:35). Under the social model, autistic people are not disabled because of their impairments or by being neurodiverse but by a society which creates an environment that fails to meet their needs. In the case of autistic people, disability results from 'living in a society which tends to be physically, socially and emotionally inhospitable towards autistic people' (den Houting, 2019:271). However, the social model has also come under criticism as some people consider the discomfort of disability related to illness as an individual rather than a social problem (Beaudry, 2016). Further still, others oppose the perceptions of themselves as an oppressed minority (Shakespeare, 2010).

The focus on incapability in a society based on competition and meritocracy where adults are expected to look after themselves, suggests an association between dependency on others, vulnerability, and lack of control over one's life as 'personal failure'. The neoliberal perspective on individual productivity, suggests Brittain & Beacom (2016:504), can lead to disabled people feeling blameworthy for 'creating a burden on society'. The charitable model of disability, although not as widely written about as the medical and social model, can impact on practice as it depicts disabled people as victims in need of care due to their 'low decision-making capacity', and 'is associated with creating relationships of high dependence' (Alves, Fazzi, & Griffo, 2010:128). Disabled woman and

feminist author, Jenny Morris (1991) highlights how charitable organisations can add to the cultural representation of disabled adults as segregated from society and as sufferers who are dependent on handouts to make their lives more bearable. Views of autistic people's lives seen through this model can undermine equality.

A fourth, more affirmative model of disability, suggested by Swain & French (2000:578) sees an assertation of positive identity in relation to being disabled and being impaired. This model rejects the 'dominant value of normality' (Swain & French, 2000:578) and focuses on identity and ways of being that embrace difference. In this non-tragic view of disability, autistic people's experiences, views, and identity are valued. The visible presence of difference in society is important in reducing stigma and stereotypical assumptions made about disabled people. Rather than the disabling attitudes of an ableist society which 'devalues disabled people' (Brittain & Beacom, 2016:502), Brisenden (1986:175) highlights that each person is unique with a range of things they can and cannot do but asserts that society views people with disability 'through spectacles that only focus on our inabilities'. How disability is theorised through different models provides a basis for how society can meet the needs of all of its citizens. The perspective from which challenges to inclusion are viewed determines the actions taken to try to resolve them. Gathering information on student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards autistic learners can help identify gaps in understanding that can be addressed through education and consequently prevent damage to autistic learners' lives. A description of autism and some of the injustices autistic people may face will be discussed next.

### 2.3 Autism

The National Autistic Society (NAS), the leading charity in the UK for autistic people and their families, define autism as 'a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them' (NAS, 2018). This definition reflects a neurodiversity view of autism which actively encourages the acknowledgement of the strengths of autistic people rather than a focus on limitations or the use of deficit language. Autism is known as a spectrum disorder and can be described as a 'developmental disability with a neurological base' (Leblanc, Richardson & Burns, 2009:166). The definition of autism includes Asperger syndrome, a label used until 2013 which has now been subsumed under the wider diagnostic label of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) following the new Diagnostic and

Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5) (APA, 2013). Autism is characterised by difficulties in 'reciprocal social interaction, communication, and restricted, stereotyped, repetitive behaviour' (WHO: ICD-10, 2016).

Worldwide research suggests that the prevalence of people with a diagnosis of autism is 1% (Lai, Lombardo & Baron-Cohen, 2014) and this parallels the prevalence rate in England (Brugha, 2019). Many factors may be contributing to a rise in the prevalence rates including changes in diagnostic criteria, more awareness of the condition, and actual increases in prevalence (Rutter, 2006). Although in the past the evidence indicated a ratio of boys to girls on the autism spectrum as 4:1 (Attwood, 1998; Fombonne, 2009), current research is starting to show the difference in the manifestation of autism in girls compared to boys (Dean, Harwood & Kasari, 2017; Wood-Downie, Wong, Kovshoff, Mandy, Hull & Hadwin, 2021). Girls on the autism spectrum have often been missed out of autism research which had focused predominantly on boys and this exclusion from the body of knowledge on autism means girls have been less likely to be diagnosed and consequently, less likely to receive appropriate support (Hebron & Bond, 2019). Sarah Hendrickx (2013) was not diagnosed as autistic until the age of 43. Even though she had worked in the field of autism for many years, she did not recognise herself to be autistic. She attributes this late diagnosis to her comparison with the male representation which differs from presentation in females (Hendrickx, 2013). Dean *et al*. (2017:678) suggest 'there is a male bias to our expectations' of autism and as boys are more prone to isolation and have interests that appear unusual to others, girls are more likely to mimic social behaviours and have interests in line with typically developing peers. 'Pretending to be normal', camouflaging, or masking is a commonly reported behaviour in autistic females (Bargiela, Steward & Mandy, 2016:3287). However, it is important that autism is recognised so that this proportion of the population are not disproportionally disadvantaged by the education system.

The increase in prevalence, and mainstreaming of students with SEND, means that more educators might have autistic learners in their classrooms and hence educators need to develop a better understanding of the complexities of this condition in order to support inclusion. This is of particular relevance as many more autistic individuals are now educated in mainstream provision as a result of both international (UNESCO, 2009) and national educational inclusion policies (DfE & DoH, 2015). However, autistic learners in mainstream education settings are also more likely to be excluded or bullied by their peers (Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2020; Cappadocia, Weiss & Pepler, 2012; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014). Factors contributing to bullying include differences in social

understanding and negative stereotypes held by neurotypical peers (Cook, Ogden & Winstone, 2020). These experiences of bullying and social exclusion can lead to damaged self-esteem, mental ill health and suicidal ideation (Mayes, Gorman, Hillwig-Garcia & Syed, 2013). Such detrimental impact on a person's life chances warrants further exploration into attitudes held by student teachers towards the inclusion of autistic learners as Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari (2003) suggest there is a link between positive teacher attitudes towards autistic learners and their inclusion into the class by their peers.

Since Kanner's (1943) first description of the condition he termed 'infantile autism', there has been a multitude of publications documenting the changes in how we have come to understand autism. Originally attributed to the coldness of parental interaction (Bettelheim, 1967), understanding of autism has advanced over the past 70 years with autism coming to the forefront in the 1990s with the growth of research in the area and the highly controversial, since discredited, research by Dr Andrew Wakefield (Godlee, Smith & Marcovitch, 2011) who suggested a link between the Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism. Although there is no evidence that the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine causes autism (Lai *et al.*, 2014), there has been a substantial decrease in MMR vaccination rates since the publication of Wakefield's paper (DeStefano & Shimabukuro, 2019). Mann (2019) argues that media narratives surrounding the autism-MMR controversy contribute to reductive stereotypes about autism. Unhelpful stereotypes are also created when connections between autism and violent behaviour and criminality are spread through the media (Brewer, Zoanetti & Young, 2017; Maras, Mulcahy & Crane, 2015). For example, Westphal (2017) emphasises the association made between mass shootings and sensationalist violence linked to autism, stating although rare, this leads to negative perceptions of people on the autism spectrum. These negative labels perpetuated in the media may create caution amongst teachers without experience of autism (Gregor & Campbell, 2001).

As well as undesirable misconceptions, fallacies of genius are also typical. Talib and Paulson (2015) in their study examining teacher education students' experiences, beliefs and perceptions of competence about working with students on the autism spectrum, found even though student teachers largely held accurate beliefs about autism, there were misconceptions around the prevalence of special talents. Although the study was limited to one organisation, it highlights how the media can inform opinions and reiterates the need for autism education to be part of the initial teacher education programmes. People with no experience of autism may gain their knowledge about the condition

through film and television and how autism is portrayed through this media may influence attitudes and behaviours. A higher proportion of autistic children to adults represented in the media may also contribute to a 'broader culture of infantilizing autism' (Mann, 2019:985) which may impact on the way autistic learners are perceived and treated within educational establishments, so it is especially important for teachers in the post-compulsory sector to have an understanding of autism. This representation of autistic people may also continue when learners transition to adulthood. Howlin (2013:898) draws attention to 'the very poor social status' of autistic adults and suggests prospects for young autistic people leaving school 'are extremely poor'. She highlights the low educational attainments of autistic individuals and states 'they are more likely to be within the lowest quintiles for social deprivation'. Van Heijst & Geurts (2015) in their empirical study in the Netherlands, found autistic people experience a lower quality of life compared to neurotypicals. Indeed, in England, just 16% of autistic adults are in full time work (NAS, 2016) and only 32% have some kind of paid employment (LDT, 2019) and this is despite the introduction of the first disability specific law in England, The Autism Act (2009). This employment imbalance may be due to lack of awareness and knowledge of the condition but may also be a reflection of attitudinal issues from the neurotypical population. However, there is a growing body of knowledge to support understanding of autism, especially in relation to sensory differences.

Crane, Goddard & Pring (2009) discuss how atypical sensory perceptual responses are prevalent in the majority of the autistic population. Sensory processing issues have been added to the diagnostic system in the USA (APA, 2013) but as yet are not included in the UK's diagnostic manual (WHO: ICD-10, 2016). Sensory differences can include both hypersensitivity, where the senses seem to be too acute, and hyposensitivity, where the senses underperform, to incoming stimuli (Bogdashina, 2005) leading to increased anxiety (Davidson, 2007). Hyper-reactivity to tactile sensory input for example may include avoidance of crowds and touch as this may result in overwhelming sensations. Even the label in a jumper can be a terrible distraction (James, 2017). Hypo-reactivity to sound for example, might cause a person to create noise through banging or tapping. Those with proprioceptive hyposensitivity may find their perception of self in space difficult (Bogdashina, 2005) and as Nazeer (2007:25) highlights would cause him to 'frequently bump up against door frames and table edges'. Bogdashina (2011) describes how susceptibility to sensory stimuli may result in heightened stress levels for autistic people. For example, a particular smell may be intensely painful. Diagnosed at the age of twenty-five, Williams (1996:202) describes her hypersensitivity as a 'fluctuating condition' affected by stress levels. Lawson (2011) also reflects on how her own experiences of

sensory overload have resulted in behaviour which is interpreted as 'challenging or difficult' and highlights how most education systems do not understand autism. Diagnosed as autistic in adulthood, Laura James (2017:15) discusses how she can feel 'assaulted by bright lights' and 'under endless attack from the smells and sounds of the environment'. Collins (2004:102) also discusses how the noise in school was overwhelming and this would lead to him screaming and flailing his arms and legs to try to 'form a bubble in which I could enclose myself'.

Fear or anxiety associated with negative sensory experiences can limit autistic learners' participation in daily activities as they may choose to opt out of opportunities (Kirby, Dickie & Baranek, 2015). In their study looking at perspectives of autistic university students, Anderson, Carter & Stephenson (2018:655) found just over half of the respondents agreed that 'their sensitivity to noise, light or smells on campus sometimes interfered with their ability to study or cope on campus'. Grandin (2015) stresses noise levels in the cafeteria and the gym as particularly noisy environments within school or college and emphasises the importance of teachers to understand the sensory issues autistic learners face. Pellicano (2013:145) highlights 'the unexpected and the unpredictable' sensory input beyond the control of the person that causes the anxiety. Environmental factors are an important consideration in education and as sensory differences are perhaps less well known, this could be a key area to encourage student teachers to reflect on to support inclusion. Especially as 'autistic people argue that autism is above all characterised by a hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli which necessitates withdrawal from a world of overwhelming sensation' (Singer, 2017:32).

It is not uncommon for behaviour such as rocking and hand-flapping, known as stimming, to occur in autistic individuals. This could be a way of screening out overwhelming sensory input and reduce the stress of the unpredictable stimuli or it could be a way of stimulating a hypo vestibular sense. Smith (2019:30) comments, 'stimming is an essential part of my life, and the lives of many autistic people' and calls on society 'to give autistic children the freedom and space to stim so that they don't feel ashamed' (Smith, 2019:39). These first-hand reports show that sensory differences vary immensely and include both hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity to incoming stimuli. Indeed, Pellicano (2013:144) explains that differences in sensory perception 'occur in most autistic individuals regardless of intellectual ability' however, until recently, lack of attention by researchers into the manifestation of sensory differences and how these can alter within individuals has impacted on understanding and has implications for accessing community and education provisions.

In their study in Australia, Ashburner, Ziviani & Rodger (2008) explored the associations between sensory processing and the educational outcomes for learners on the autistic spectrum and found children with this diagnosis were more likely to underachieve academically. The ability to concentrate on processing verbal instructions when the environment is overloading the sensory system is a barrier for learners on the autism spectrum (Ashburner *et al.*, 2008). Howe & Stagg (2016) asked adolescents in the East of England with a diagnosis of autism about how they perceived their sensory differences to affect their experiences within the classroom. All fourteen of the participants described difficulties in the classroom within at least one sensory domain with hearing rated as the most affected. Research in the North-East of England by Jones, Hanley & Riby (2020) found teachers and parents reported sensory differences had a significant impact on learning and on school life. Auditory differences were perceived by both teachers and parents to affect learning most frequently. Modern classrooms often have colourful display boards, strip lighting, the sound of a projector and many voices from the rising number of learners taught together in one room, not to mention the various odours including perfumes emanating from the various people nearby which present challenges for autistic learners. As instructions are often presented verbally it can be difficult for autistic learners to process this transient communication and this can affect learning and behaviour. Grandin (2015:40) asserts that instructions need to be written down as she 'cannot remember long strings of verbal communications'. If student teachers have an understanding of this processing difficulty, they would be able to plan delivery to remove such barriers by supporting verbal input with a concrete visual aid improving access to the learning materials. Sensory differences can be hard to understand but 'disability often can be minimised or avoided through environmental change and the provision of appropriate assistive tools'(den Houting, 2019:271).

As it is the interpretation and implementation of inclusion that is important, the next section will provide a historical overview of the development of Special Educational Needs (SEN) policy within England and will explore international policy changes relating to inclusive practice that have been influential in supporting the rights of disabled learners.

### 2.4 Policy context

The Warnock Report (1978) formed the first comprehensive review of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the UK. The publication of this report introduced the term SEN and disabilities in place of labels such as 'handicapped' and recognised the importance of ITE

and a commitment to provision in mainstream schools for children with SEN. The Warnock Report (1978) stressed the importance of positive attitudes and the development of skills required to work with learners with SEN. However, this commitment to meeting the needs of learners with SEN did not extend to the Further Education (FE) sector. The report published by Tomlinson in 1996 entitled 'Inclusive Learning' was the first national review of FE in the UK for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD). This report found that learners with SEN in the post-compulsory sector were excluded and unable to access the wider curriculum. It aimed to extend further and adult education provision to thousands of people who were not at that time included within the general approach to learning for all students. It sought a more equitable approach to educational provision and aimed to shift provision from a discrete approach to a more inclusive one. Rather than problematising learners with a deficit, it initiated the use of the term 'inclusive learning' and placed responsibility on teachers, colleges and the education system as a whole to improve educational opportunities for learners with LDD. This reflected the international policy change, for example the introduction of the Salamanca Statement (1994). Referred to by Ainscow & Miles (2008:16) as 'arguably the most significant document that has ever appeared in the field of special education', the Salamanca Statement suggested a considerable change in policy direction as it championed 'education for all' through a collective agreement between nations to implement inclusive policy. Under UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994:6) 'human differences are normal' and adaptations to the needs of the learner should be provided rather than trying to adapt the learner to fit into the system. The Salamanca Statement (1994) concluded that an orientation to inclusive practice within regular schools would help build communities, combat discriminatory attitudes, and ultimately improve efficiency and cost-effectiveness to the education system. Twenty-five years on, this international document continues to be immensely influential in inclusive policy and practice development, although the authors recognise the continued struggle in moving forward (Ainscow, Slee & Best, 2019).

The responsibility to provide opportunities for learners with LDD/SEND lies in part with the ITE providers. In 2006, the UK House of Commons Education and Select Committee highlighted the lack of emphasis on SEN in ITE and in continuing professional development (CPD) and recommended SEN become a core, compulsory part of ITE. It also emphasised the need for greater coverage of child development in general and with reference to particular diagnostic categories. Following this report, training programmes were developed for ITE students and for in-service teachers as part of a continuing professional development package through the Inclusion Development Programme (National Strategies, 2008). However, an investigation by Lamb (2009) into parental confidence in the special

educational needs system highlighted the need to ensure that the workforce had the skills to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND and to ensure that access to specialist support was available. Key recommendations were improvements in outcomes for children, a stronger voice for parents and a more accountable system. It was also suggested Ofsted inspectors should receive additional training to improve the quality of monitoring provision for learners with SEND. The key messages from this research were that 'parents need to be listened to more and the system needs to be more ambitious for their children' (Lamb, 2009:1). But the greatest improvement that could be made, Lamb (2009:2) suggested, was 'to change the culture of low expectations for children with SEN'.

To tackle educational inequality, the 2010 UK coalition Government called to 'remove the bias towards inclusion' (Cabinet Office, 2010:29) as all types of provisions, including mainstream schools, specialist schools and specialist units in mainstream settings, had a place in meeting the different needs of learners. In response to parental demand, the Government sought to prevent the unnecessary closure of specialist provisions and provide a wider choice of different kinds of school in order that all learners could flourish. It has been argued by Runswick- Cole (2011) that the purported claim of bias towards inclusion was rooted in inconsistencies as learners with SEND failing to fit in with the standards-driven education system often resulted in the exclusion of learners due to the competing policy demands of the inclusion agenda and the standards agenda. In some cases, this resulted in learners with SEND being physically segregated from their peers and taught by unqualified teachers.

Ten years on, Thomas & Whitburn (2019:165) argue 'scant attention has been paid to inclusive education in ITE'. The recently published review of the curriculum for ITE (Perry, Booth, Owen, Bower, 2019) concurs with this viewpoint and highlights the need for teachers to understand how to work with diverse student groups as this is lacking in the ITE curriculum. However, the expectations of teachers to meet the needs of a diverse range of learners have continued to rise. Although international and national policy is clear about the rights of pupils with disabilities (Equality Act 2010; Human Rights 1998; UNESCO, 1994; UNESCO, 2009), how inclusive education is supported in ITE is debatable. Most European countries do not have separate initial teacher education programmes for special education (Florian, 2012) yet many teachers view the inclusion of learners with disabilities as additional to their role (Hellawell, 2015) and time-poor teachers regularly view inclusion as an added burden (Thomas & Whitburn, 2019). Increased planning time, the possibility that the inclusion of learners with disabilities will have a detrimental effect on other learners in the classroom, and worries about insufficient training to prepare them

for inclusive practice are just some of the concerns teachers have about the inclusion of learners with disabilities (Campbell, Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2003). A tool to support teachers to develop inclusive practice in teacher education was developed by the European Union and the Council of Europe (Hollenweger, Pantić and Florian, 2015) with an emphasis on the need for collaboration amongst providers of teacher education highlighted. This report stressed the importance of student teachers having the opportunity to work in inclusive environments to develop their 'core identity as an inclusive practitioner' (Hollenweger *et al.,* 2015:13). They suggest teacher professionalism is a key factor to promoting inclusive education and requires teachers to continuously develop their practice. Rather than introducing new modules, the members of this network suggested an upgrade to the existing programmes for teacher education. To support the development of teachers the Excellence Everywhere white paper (DfE, 2016) suggested ongoing investment is needed in appropriate SEND training for educational professionals in order to improve outcomes for learners. The Tool to Upgrade Teacher Education Practices for Inclusive Education (Hollenweger *et al.*, 2015) can support teacher educators, teachers and student teachers to reflect on and develop their practice.

Current policy emphasis on inclusive education in England and the move towards including learners with SEND in mainstream education provisions (Carter, 2015; Children and Families Act, 2014; DfE, 2015) has impacted on educational responses as FE establishments must consider ways of including learners with SEND. Rather than separating learners into discrete provisions, the SEND Code of Practice (2015) places a duty on local authorities to ensure learners with SEND without an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan are educated within mainstream provision (DfE & DoH, 2015:25). The Children and Families Act (2014) places FE colleges under new duties which includes the duty to use their 'best endeavours' to secure the educational provision that all young people need. FE colleges must have regard to the SEND Code of Practice (2015) and cooperate with local authorities as under the Act (2014) there is now a coherent 0–25 years system which brings parity of rights for those at school and at college. This equality of rights reflects a key focus of government policies across many parts of the world which is the idea of social cohesion and education reform as a route to social inclusion (Armstrong *et al.*, 2011). In 2016, the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2016) were adopted by world leaders to tackle inequalities, promote social inclusion and improve the lives and prospects of everyone whilst also addressing the climate emergency. Goal 4 focuses on inclusive and equitable quality education which clearly shows education for all still is a challenge and global priority.

Lindsay (2003) asserts support for inclusion is based on the right of children and young people to be included within mainstream schools. However, ITE programmes are perhaps not equipping all newly qualified teachers with the skills required to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. Not all ITE providers place an equally high priority on learners with SEND and research from the Driver Youth Trust (DYT, 2019) found fifty out of 354 inspections over the last ten years did not mention special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) once. They also found on average Ofsted's reports on ITE providers mentioned SEND just once. The lack of attention given to learners with SEND from the regulatory body Ofsted may also be a factor impacting on the coverage of SEND in ITE programmes. These continued concerns around the efficacy of ITE in this aspect may highlight the low priority placed on SEND.

Although the Carter Review into Initial Teacher Training (ITT) (2015:34) suggests 'ITT should prepare all new teachers to support SEND in their classrooms' (2015:24) and that SEND 'should not be treated as an optional extra but as a priority', there is a gap in illustrating how such training should be carried out. Through my research I hoped to gain insight from the student teachers to support the development of the ITE programmes in the organisation I work for. The next section will explore what is known from research about preparing teachers for inclusive practice.

### 2.5 Preparing teachers for inclusion

When viewed as a separate specialism, Ainscow & Tweddle (1988) suggested student teachers and indeed, those already qualified in the profession, may see themselves as incapable of meeting the needs of learners with SEND. Jordan, Schwartz & McGhie-Richmond (2009:535) suggest a popular consensus amongst regular teachers is that inclusion of learners with SEND in their classrooms is 'a policy doomed to fail' as they fear they do not have the specialised teaching skills required. It is considered that the teaching of learners with SEND is the responsibility of specialist practitioners (Chiner & Cardona, 2013). Indeed, Tomlinson (2012:281) suggests the appointment of an obligatory special needs co-ordinator in schools in England 'quickly led mainstream teachers to feel able to abrogate responsibility for special needs'.

Yet evidence from Booth and Ainscow (2002) suggests an opposing viewpoint that learners with SEND can benefit from being included rather than being segregated into separate learning environments. In their literature review of attitudes towards integration/

inclusion, Avramidis & Norwich (2002) found experiences of teaching learners with SEN in a carefully planned and supportive way, results in the development of a more positive attitude towards inclusion. Rodríguez, Saldaña & Moreno (2012:1) emphasise 'positive teacher attitudes' as an important predictor of the successful education of autistic learners. In their study in the south-west of England into the attitudes of mainstream teachers towards the inclusion of children with SEN, Avramidis, Bayliss & Burden (2000) found attitudes towards inclusion were associated with the respondents' perceptions of the skills they possessed. Teachers with SEND qualifications have been reported to have more favourable attitudes towards inclusion than those with a general teaching qualification (Avramidis *et al.,* 2000; Segall & Campbell, 2012). Jordan *et al.* (2009) highlight how beliefs about the nature of disability and underlying epistemological beliefs about the means of acquiring knowledge impact on inclusionary practice and it is widely acknowledged that attitudes have a direct connection to teacher actions (Mulholland and Cumming, 2016; WHO, 2019). Teachers who accept that learners with SEND are their responsibility tend to be more effective overall (Jordan *et al.*, 2009). However, some teachers often see the inclusion of learners on the autism spectrum as especially complex (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2012:1) and feelings of inadequacy are often experienced by teachers (Hellawell, 2015; Leblanc *et al.*, 2009).

Bandura (2008) argued that belief in an individual's capability to a execute a behaviour influences events in our lives. He termed this notion self-efficacy. However, if a person doubts whether they can perform the required activities their behaviour will not change (Bandura, 1977:193). Belief in their own ability to do the job affects how they will cope. If student teachers are afraid of the challenge of including autistic learners, they may avoid this situation as they believe it will exceed what they are capable of. Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson & Scott (2013) suggest it is not only adequate knowledge of autism that is a challenge for teachers to support inclusion but a lack of access to support and advice around supporting autistic learners socially, academically and behaviourally. This concurs with research by Rodríguez *et al.* (2012) who interviewed sixty-nine special education teachers on their attitudes towards teaching learners on the autism spectrum. Although the participants were positive in their attitude toward the inclusion of autistic learners, an autism network and ongoing training were found to be key factors needed to support inclusive practice. Indeed, Avramidis *et al.* (2000) highlight one of the most important aspects influencing teachers' attitudes towards inclusion is the support they receive.

Danker, Strnadová & Cumming (2019:2928) highlight the key role teachers play in facilitating the inclusion of autistic learners into mainstream classes and emphasise

teacher attitudes as a factor to successful inclusion. In their Australian study they used semi-structured interviews to elicit the views of teachers around the well-being of autistic learners. They found some teachers admitted to finding the challenging behaviours of these students 'annoying and distracting' and a lack of knowledge around autism negatively impacted their ability to make adjustments to include autistic learners in the lessons. They concluded this could be detrimental to the learners' engagement in class and ultimately their well-being. Hendrickx (2015) highlights the professional duty of teachers to consider their personal feelings towards autistic learners and suggests that ITE programmes should include this type of reflective practice and Ravet (2018:716) states there is 'a clear need for more research into student teacher perceptions of autism in the UK'. Avramidis & Norwich (2002) suggest previous experiences, or lack of, will influence teachers' perceptions of a particular impairment, for example, autism. The behaviour from the teacher towards the autistic learner may impact on the self-concept of the individual who may begin to see autism as a defining negative label if reactions from teachers are consistently awkward. For example, Humphrey & Lewis (2008) examined the views of autistic learners in four mainstream secondary schools in England to develop understanding and inform practice around the inclusion process for autistic learners. Through semi-structured interviews and learner diaries, they found autistic learners' views of themselves may be constructed by the feedback they receive from teachers. One learner in this study reported teachers treating him differently after finding out that he was autistic, and this can have negative ramifications. Understanding specific teaching strategies can make a significant difference to the teachers' ability to plan and deliver inclusive lessons and consequently on how the learners may feel about themselves.

Simpson, Mundschenk & Heflin (2011:5) emphasise how ITE programmes lack the 'scope and depth required to produce highly qualified teachers for students on the autism spectrum' and suggest the need for extensive field experience in this area, with expert teachers to develop knowledge and skills. Indeed, many studies point to a general lack of training suggesting new teachers are not confident to teach learners in inclusive settings (Able, Sreckovic, Schultz, Garwood & Sherman, 2015; Leblanc *et al.*, 2009; Morley, Maher, Walsh, Dinning, Lloyd & Pratt, 2017; Sanz-Cervera, Fernández-Andrés, Pastor-Cerezuela & Tárraga-Mínguez, 2017) or have specific training in evidence-based strategies for people on the autism spectrum (Simpson *et al.*, 2011). Possible reasons for the lack of focus on specific teaching strategies for students on the autism spectrum include 'tutor expertise, concerns about medical labelling and questions about ITE curriculum overload and priorities' (Ravet, 2018:714). Tutor expertise was also recently emphasised in OFSTED's (2020b) research into ITE curriculum quality; they found student teachers reported a

variation in preparedness for teaching learners with SEND and this was often dependent on the programmes' delivery staff having knowledge and expertise in this area. However, even a little autism input on ITE programmes has made some difference to the way student teachers perceive autistic learners. In a Canadian study with beginning teachers, Leblanc *et al*. (2009) examined the impact of a 3 hour 20-minute autism training package. Their findings suggest that even a small amount of instruction can have an impact on participants' perceptions and knowledge of autism thus reducing the anxiety that some teachers feel towards the inclusion of autistic learners.

The number of autistic learners moving on to further and higher education is increasing (Vincent, 2019) and it is important to prepare teachers in this sector to effectively include these learners. However, there is ongoing concern about how to support autistic learners within mainstream provision. The NAS report (Moore, 2016) discovered a lack of autism knowledge amongst professionals within the education sector and Brede, Remington, Kenny, Warren & Pellicano (2016) highlight the lack of training in understanding autism which leads to communication and behaviour being misunderstood. Indeed, Richards (2010) highlights the rising expectations of mainstream teachers to develop the skills necessary to meet the needs of learners with SEND stating many student teachers lack confidence and feel unprepared for teaching children and young people with SEND. Ellis and Tod (2014) report almost half of mainstream teachers in primary and secondary education in England did not feel prepared to effectively teach learners with SEND and Webster and Blatchford (2014) found that primary school teachers in England received no training to meet the needs of learners with SEND and as a result did not feel sufficiently equipped to deal with the challenges of teaching learners with SEND. Similarly, Ravet argues (2018:717) the lack of attention to autism on ITE programmes leaves student teachers 'ill-equipped' to deal with the 'professional challenge' of including autistic learners.

It has been illustrated that the way teachers relate to learners will depend on their past experiences and how they perceive difference and disability (Brownlee & Carrington, 2000:99). Ainscow & Miles (2008:21) suggest what is important to an inclusive pedagogy 'is the way teachers conceptualize notions of difference'. Personal experience may be considered the most important source of learning. Nash & Norwich (2010) suggest direct, supported experiences of working with learners with SEND can promote positive attitudes and help develop the skills required to work with a diverse range of learners. Sharma, Forlin & Loreman (2008) also advocate creating opportunities for student teachers to interact with persons with disabilities whilst on the ITE programme, as this is likely to

support them to include students with disabilities in their classrooms. In their study with 603 pre-service teachers across Australia, Canada, Hong Kong and Singapore, Sharma *et al*. (2008:783) found 'the content and the pedagogy of a programme are by far the most significant predictors of pre-service teachers' attitudes, sentiments and concerns about inclusion'. Kuzminski, Netto, Wilson, Falkmer, Chamberlain & Falkmer (2019) studied Australian societal attitudes towards autism and found first-hand experience, through spending time with autistic people, helped dispel misconceptions and improved attitudes towards the autistic community. In their study in Australia exploring pre-service teachers' attitudes towards disability and inclusion Campbell, Gilmore & Cuskelly *(*2003) found interaction with learners with disabilities, alongside a one-semester taught module on Human Development and Education, resulted in more positive attitudes towards inclusion. Level of contact with learners with disabilities has been highlighted in other studies as a major factor in shaping positive attitudes towards disability (Florin, Fogarty & Carroll, 1999; Hastings, Hewes, Lock & Witting, 1996; Rodríguez *et al*., 2012). Indeed, several studies have found that student teachers consider the work placement as the most important aspect of their ITE programme for learning about SEND (Lawson, 2015; Mintz, 2015; Norwich and Nash, 2013) and Brownlee & Carrington (2000) found seven out of the eleven ITE students interviewed as part of their research suggested practical experience of teaching learners with disabilities would improve preparation for teaching learners with diverse needs. Barnhill, Polloway & Sumutka (2011) suggest that student teachers require opportunities to practise skills learnt with a range of individuals on the autism spectrum and that the depth of training to work with this heterogenous group is delivered whilst on ITE programmes and continues throughout their careers.

Rodríguez *et al*. (2012) suggest teacher training and provision of resources are the key variables most related to a positive perception of inclusive practice. Although still a high priority for policy makers across the UK (APPGA 2012; DoH 2010), Ravet (2018:715) suggests Initial Teacher Education (ITE) is paying 'surprisingly little attention' to if or how student teachers are equipped to attend to the learning needs of children and young people on the autism spectrum. The 'considerable variations in practice and quality' of PGCE providers was one of the issues highlighted by OFSTED (2008:4). OFSTED (2008) reported one-year PGCE programmes struggled the most with time available to dedicate to SEN compared with other types of ITE programmes. This is a key concern for my own practice as the majority of the ITE provision is a one-year full-time post-graduate route. Ofsted's recent ITE curriculum research (2020) suggests more coverage could be given to the teaching of children with diverse needs. Yet, Florian (2012:277) highlights the unfeasibility of preparing teachers for 'every type of challenge or difficulty'. Given the

high prevalence of autism, preparing teachers for the inclusion of autistic learners is an area we should be focusing on in ITE. In fact, the Carter Review (2015:35) highlights autism spectrum as one of 'the most common issues' teachers will encounter and states trainee teachers should be provided with 'practical strategies for addressing these needs'. Ainscow (2013:8) suggests inclusion is an active, continuous process and that ultimately 'inclusion involves the active combating of exclusion'. However, exclusion in England is a major concern. This will be explored in the following section.

### 2.6 Exclusion

It is estimated that 70% of autistic learners are educated in mainstream provision (NAS, 2017) but since 2011 there has been a 60% increase of autistic learners being excluded from school (Ambitious about Autism, 2018). Autistic learners are susceptible to exclusion as their behaviour is often misunderstood (Young, 2012). The increase in both legal and illegal exclusions of autistic learners, where learners are sent home for a 'cooling off' period and not formally recorded as exclusion (Brede, Remington, Kenny, Warren & Pellicano, 2017), suggests preparing student teachers for the inclusion of all autistic learners is vital. The rise in numbers of exclusions in England is in 'stark contrast to the situation in Scotland where the use of permanent exclusion has been virtually eliminated' (Cole, McCluskey, Daniels, Thompson & Tawell, 2019:1). Even though this study did not focus specifically on autistic learners, the fact that autistic learners are frequently misunderstood by teaching staff puts them at greater risk of exclusion than their neurotypical peers (Brede, *et al*., 2017; Moore, 2016). The Department for Education (2015) supports these claims, stating that autistic learners are excluded from school more often than their peers without the condition. Historically autistic people have been excluded from society (Silberman, 2015) and this starts with exclusion from education. Learners who are excluded from education are failed by the education system.

The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2019), who regulate and inspect educational provision, have recently produced a new Education Inspection Framework. This document contains an explicit focus on the quality of education for learners with SEND which was lacking in the previous Common Inspection Framework (2015). The new framework will inspect how well leaders take into account the needs of learners and how they plan a curriculum which is ambitious for all learners, 'particularly the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or high needs' (Ofsted, 2019:9). The introduction of this new inspection criteria will hopefully

incentivise leaders to ensure autistic learners' needs and aspirations are considered in planning and delivering learning. It will also reduce the likelihood of learners being 'off-rolled', defined by Ofsted as

> the practice of removing a learner from the provider's roll without a formal, permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove their child, when the removal is primarily in the interests of the provider rather than in the best interests of the learner (Ofsted, 2019:11).

The practice of off-rolling has been a recent concern in education. The House of Commons Education Committee (2018) whose inquiry into support for children and young people with SEND collated evidence, from both parents and professionals, labelled ever increasing exclusions as a 'scandal'. They referred to the problems that inclusive schools have in supporting learners with SEND as such schools were becoming oversubscribed, putting pressure on administrative and funding systems. Non-inclusive schools were found to be illegally excluding learners with SEND and off-rolling or encouraging learners to move schools was highlighted as common practice. Such practices are a result of performance driven targets placed on schools and colleges and do not lend itself to inclusive practice.

The Education Select Committee SEND inquiry (2019) also expressed concern about the tension between available provision and the needs of the learners. Following Edward Timpson's (DFE, 2019) review of school exclusions, the Department for Education committed to review the SEND Code of Practice (2015), the statutory guidance setting out how children and young people with SEN should be supported by the local authority, and education and health sectors. Introduced in times of austerity, this statutory guidance was affected by the earlier financial crisis and local governments were required to make savings in education. This same inquiry highlighted the lack of post-16 opportunities for learners with SEND and stated, 'we are letting down an entire generation of young people' (Education Select Committee, 2019:22) and adding pressure and unnecessary costs to the social care system.

Disability remains a significant factor in exclusion from school. Indeed, the World Health Organisation (2011) state young people with disabilities are among the most marginalised group denied their right to a quality education. Although autistic learners are enrolled in mainstream schools and colleges, they face barriers to education as teachers may not have the necessary skills, knowledge or attitudes towards meeting their needs. This often

results in unqualified teachers, for example teaching assistants, providing the majority of the teaching for learners with additional needs (Giangreco, 2003).

In concluding their research on inclusion and exclusion for students displaying challenging behaviour in an English secondary school, Stanforth & Rose (2018:1238) suggest more focus within ITE on understanding the needs of the 'disproportionate representation of certain groups' who are excluded. In fact, the number of autistic learners excluded from schools in England has more than doubled in the space of seven years (Cutting & Moore, 2019). In 2016-17, 4,840 autistic learners received at least one fixed period exclusion (DfE, 2018). There is huge variation in the type of incidents that warrant exclusion, however, the most frequent reason given by head teachers for excluding learners was 'physical assault against an adult' (Cutting & Moore, 2019:1). Exclusion from an educational establishment is a disciplinary measure in reaction to students' misbehaviour (Valdebenito, Eisner, Farrington, Ttofi & Sutherland, 2019), however, when the behaviour displayed is a result of a person's autism the exclusion may be illegal. Clarity of what schools and colleges obligations are under the Equality Act (2010) is needed. A landmark court ruling in 2018 highlighted a legal loophole in the Equality Act which suggested if a child or young person had a 'tendency to physical abuse'; schools did not have to make reasonable adjustments for the individual. This practice was ruled as discriminatory by the court and as a result if steps have not been taken to put support in place, autistic learners cannot be excluded for behaviour that is linked to their autism. The Government has worked with their Behaviour Advisor, Tom Bennett (2017), to establish more consistent guidelines to responding to behaviour in schools. However, Cutting & Moore (2019) have concerns that the rights of children with disabilities were downplayed. Bennett (2018) has also dismissed the House of Commons Education Select Committee's (2018) conclusion that zero-tolerance behaviour policies contribute to the rise in exclusions.

Exclusion can have lifelong damaging effects. As an educator and as a researcher, I believe it is important to understand the viewpoints of student teachers around the inclusion of autistic learners in order to make progress in preparing them to teach in an inclusive environment with the aim of creating better life chances for individuals on the autism spectrum. Learner behaviours are often a result of different ways of perceiving and interpreting the world but as autism is a hidden disability this is not always considered when addressing behaviour. Rather than expecting the individual to change, it is imperative that educators are knowledgeable and confident in this area to support inclusion and eliminate the existing barriers to support a fair and equitable education for all. With this in mind, the ethics of care, which places relationships 'at the heart of

pedagogy' (Black & Wiliam, 1998:16), sees and responds to the needs of others and takes 'care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left behind' (Gilligan, 2003:62), will be the lens this research is viewed through. This theory will be discussed later in this dissertation. The following section will define the area in which my research is focused, that is initial teacher education (ITE) programmes preparing teachers to work in the post-compulsory or further education (FE) sector, and student teachers' perspectives on this area on inclusion and autism.

### 2.7 Research aims and questions

The FE sector is less regulated and has less established standards than the English schools' sector (Perry *et al.*, 2019) and compared to the schools' sector is 'chronically underfunded' (Orr, 2020:508) and under-researched with regards to teacher education (Thurston, 2010). Indeed, Meir (2018:338) highlights the lack of academic research undertaken specifically on the implementation of inclusive practice within the FE sector. Elias, Muskett & White (2019) also highlight the lack of research in the postsecondary sector regarding what educators feel are the challenges when including autistic learners. As the number of individuals with a diagnosis of autism continues to rise, this is likely to lead to an increased interest in post compulsory education programmes. Supporting the transition of autistic learners from compulsory schooling to college or work-based training is crucial, especially as autistic learners are likely to find this change difficult as adapting to new routines and expectations to self-organise could be challenging for the autistic individual (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014). Teachers' perspectives of autism could impact on this transition and the success or otherwise of the educational placement. The WHO (2019:19) recommend 'collecting information on knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes about disability' in order to 'confront negative perceptions' and 'help identify gaps in public understanding'. Therefore, this study focuses on the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of student teachers preparing to work in the post-compulsory sector with respect to inclusion and autism. It is important that research in this area occurs in order to work towards social justice and a more equitable society for all through tackling inequalities that lead to educational and social exclusion.

Taking a predominantly empirical, interpretivist enquiry, which will be explained in more depth in the following chapters, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten PGCE student-teachers.

I aimed to answer the following research questions:

1) What are the student teachers' understandings of inclusion and autism?

2) What are the student teachers' attitudes towards including autistic learners?

3) What do student teachers consider as factors impacting on the inclusion of autistic learners?

4) What are the student teachers' opinions on how well the PGCE prepares them to support autistic learners?

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction to research design

This chapter outlines my philosophical position with respect to this study. The chapter will start by briefly explaining my own personal and professional motivations for undertaking this study and my reasons for situating this within an Ethics of Care framework. I will then provide an overview of ethics of care which will be followed by explaining recruitment, responsibilities and ethical considerations for the research project. Following this an exploration of researcher identity and consideration for measuring goodness in qualitative, interpretive methodology will be provided. I will then offer an explanation for, and reflection on, the use of semi-structured interviews. The chapter concludes with an explanation of thematic analysis and how this was used to analyse the data collected in this study.

A paradigm can be defined as a worldview (Racher & Robinson, 2003) or belief system 'through which investigation is accomplished' (Weaver & Olson, 2006: 460). Guba (1990:17, cited in Creswell, 2013:18) defined paradigm as 'a basic set of beliefs that guide action'. As 'epistemological beliefs are those beliefs about the nature of knowledge, knowing and how people acquire knowledge' (Jordan *et al.*, 2009:539), it is crucial to acknowledge my own position as a researcher as my own background and experiences will inevitably influence the research. Currently a teacher educator, I have been teaching since 1999. The majority of this time has been spent teaching learners on the autism spectrum in both specialist provision and in general further education colleges. My own experiences and observations in this field have led to my belief that there is not enough understanding of autistic learners and this leads to injustice and unfairness in the education system. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, neurological differences lead to misunderstandings in communication and can often result in exclusion. I consider more attention should be given to understanding the needs of learners on the autism spectrum and that this should be addressed through initial teacher education programmes and ongoing professional development.

A philosophy based on relations, the ethics of care provided a role in the way the research was designed as like the concept of ethics of care, research involving people is relational with the emphasis on 'experiences and subjectivity, on close personal interaction, and on reciprocity of researcher and the researched' (Kvale, 2006:481). Ethics of care is not only a useful lens through which to view the findings of my research, it underpinned my project

throughout from the research design, initial connection to the participants, through data collection and analysis and including the final write up and presentation of the findings. Elucidation of how researchers care in and through the research is often neglected and yet is central to the process (Herron & Skinner, 2013:1697). Actions taken throughout the study have been informed by care which puts relationships and the presentation of participants' voices at the heart of the study. This involved being critically reflexive and sensitive, attentive and responsive as a researcher. This will be explained in more detail throughout the following sections and will be referred to throughout all the chapters.

### 3.2 Theoretical framework: ethics of care

The ethics of care is a 'normative moral theory' (Noddings, 1986:xiv). Although there is not one ethic of care, the essential characteristic of an ethic of care, according to care theorists, is that the relational is more important than the individual. Carol Gilligan is credited with being 'one of the people most responsible for identifying and naming the major alternative approach to moral questions that is the ethics of care' (Held, 2014). Seeing and responding to the needs of others and ensuring no one is left alone was key for Gilligan's (2003) care ethics. It differs from other forms of philosophy and was developed as an alternative to moral theories and 'in contrast with the ethics of justice' (Held, in Engster & Hamington, 2015:19). Ethics of care is not a form of utilitarianism as it does not separate means and ends or suggest the greatest good for the greatest number. Nor can it be labelled a virtue ethic as in virtue ethics it is feasible to care about a person and yet not connect with the recipient of care. Ethics of care goes 'beyond individualism and rights-based thinking' (Kröger, 2009:406). It is based on interdependence and according to Noddings (1992:21), who brought ethics of care to the educational forefront, always asks what happens to the relation – 'it is an ethic of relation' and 'makes its special contribution through the relational sense' (Noddings, 2002:87). The relational approach to caring in education is explained by Walker & Gleaves (2016:66) as 'the active fostering of and maintenance of pedagogic relationships' comprising of 'trust, acceptance, diligence and individual attentiveness'.

An ethic of care is a needs and response based ethic (Noddings, 1992) which sees 'inequity as structural' and 'interdependence as a necessary aspect of the human condition' (Gary, & Berlinger, 2020:56). Held (2005) maintains the central focus of the ethics of care is to attend to and meet the needs of those for whom we take responsibility for. Noddings (1992) suggests teachers have a responsibility to create caring relationships with their

students and to also support them to develop the capacity to care for others. As a teacher educator it is my responsibility to support student teachers to develop the competence to care for all students, including those on the autistic spectrum who student teachers might have difficulty communicating with. Kittay (2001:560) states it is important to cultivate virtue in order to maintain care when it becomes 'difficult and disadvantageous to us'. The disadvantage to us that Kittay highlights, might in this neoliberal context, be that of including those students who are not likely to achieve the target grades set by schools and colleges. Including learners with SEN in mainstream provision may threaten performance audits (Slee, 2011:87) and place mounting demands on teachers which may cause a decline in caring (Tronto, 2015). Competitive market forces in the operation of the education system, first introduced in the 1980s with Thatcher's Conservative government, have created a culture of testing, individualism and meritocracy which largely ignores the dependency we have with each other and positions 'profit-making as the organising principle of life' (Chatzidakis, Hakim, Littler, Rottenburg & Segal, 2020:3). Bergmark (2019:11) suggests that with this emphasis on individuality the idea of care 'goes against the grain of the grand narrative of today's society' making care difficult to accomplish. Education is viewed as a commodity; however, the inequality of access to resources is ignored and learners with SEN, suggests Tomlinson (2012), may appear as 'increasingly surplus' in 'knowledge economies'. Current political ideologies suggest economic and social survival is dependent on the development of human capital (Tomlinson, 2012), yet if a proportion of society is viewed as unable or unlikely to be productive, they may not receive the investment in their education which other members of society can access. Indeed, Kittay (2011b:49) highlights the discrimination suffered by people with disabilities 'in jobs, education, and housing', and claims they 'are deprived of capabilities as basic as the freedom to move about'. The lack of freedom to achieve such basic human rights, asserts Nussbaum (2006:75), is a 'failure of justice'. However, regardless of expected economic return, autistic learners are equally entitled to education as anyone else (Robeyns, 2006). However, the absence of understanding of autistic learners can lead to a reduction in expectations which results in people not reaching their full potential (Williams, 1996). It is a human rights issue if autistic people do not have the opportunity to live life on equal balance with the neurotypical population.

Noddings (1992) states there is a clear challenge to care in schools as the structure of schooling does not support caring relations. She argues that the need for care is greater than ever. Caring should be at the heart of education. Principles that guide ethical behaviour are written in professional standards for teachers. The guidance from the Education and Training Foundation (2014), the standards for the post-compulsory sector,

includes the criterion 'build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners'. Yet, Thomas & Whitburn (2019:161) propose that we have 'forgotten to connect with our students' and suggest that instead of looking to diagnose a problem the focus should be on what they consider to be the core of the matter – the relationship between the teacher and the learner. Indeed, Noddings (1992:15) states the importance of the relational, that is, the 'connection or encounter between two human beings – a carer and a recipient of care, or cared-for'. She highlights the importance of both parties contributing to the relation and suggests without 'an encounter or connection in which each party feels something toward the other – it is not a *caring* relation' (Noddings, 1992:15). The humanity that appears to have become lost in education may be strengthened by an approach underpinned by an ethics of care (Shelby, 2003). Indeed, Noddings (2012) sees the main purpose of education is one of creating caring individuals. She suggests most teachers care in a virtue sense, as in they will be conscientious in their role in supporting learners to achieve. There is a difference, she suggests, in that caring in the relational sense involves building trust and involves high levels of empathy. This is important as Held (2005) contends that care is a fundamental value and that although there can be care without justice, there can be no justice without care, as without care children would not survive and the human race would cease to exist.

Tronto and Fisher's (1990) definition of care differs from Gilligan (2003) and Noddings (2002) in that it is a public and political activity and not just based specifically in dyadic relationships (Bozalek, McMillan, Marshall, November, Daniels & Sylvester, 2014). Tronto & Fisher (1990) identified four phrases of care and suggest this be used as a framework for political change. The four phrases are described as: *caring about*, *caring for, care giving* and *care receiving*. To *care about* requires paying attention to the needs of others, whether these are articulated or not and making a decision to be attentive to that need. *Caring for* is to take on the responsibility to meet the identified needs. *Care giving* is the actual material meeting of the need in a competent manner and care receiving requires responsiveness of the person who has *received the care*; this will happen whether the care giving was successful or not. Kittay (2011a:616) highlights this consequentialist aspect of an ethic of care as part of Tronto's and Nodding's philosophy as 'ministrations directed at the other are not care until they are taken up by the cared-for as care'. This places accountability on teachers to provide the right care for their learners. Owens & Ennis (2005) suggest caring teachers take responsibility to accumulate information about individual learners and use this to plan interactions, assess needs and make decisions in the best interests of the learners. This support, suggest Avramidis & Norwich (2002:142), is important in creating positive attitudes towards the inclusion of learners with SEN.

However, class size and limitations on time may impact on the nurturing of relationships. Building reciprocal, trusting relationships requires time, commitment and attentiveness to the needs of others. In their study on the well-being of autistic learners Danker *et al*. (2019:2930) found half of the twenty teachers interviewed recognised that good relationships between the teachers and learners contribute to a sense of belonging and connectedness. Those teachers without a qualification in SEND felt developing a personal relationship with the learners would enable them to better meet the needs of students. However, high teacher to learner ratios make it difficult to develop personal relationships. Kuronja, Čagran & Krajnc (2019) suggest that smaller class sizes, as often seen in specialist SEND provisions, enable the teacher to develop personal relationships with their learners. As a result of this ability to spend time with them, the learners feel that teachers care about them.

Inclusion in schools and colleges is 'central to the cultivation of caring in society' (Smit & Scherman, 2016:5). Indeed, Kittay's proposal for a philosophy of justice is based on the vulnerability of all human-beings and our 'inevitable dependency and inextricable interdependency' (Kittay, 2015:286). Calling for a theory of justice based on care for fellow citizens who form the basis of complex social arrangements and political structures, she emphasises the inadequacy of a society which does not consider the needs of disabled people. To remedy this, Kittay (2011b:52) advocates an ethic of care, which she describes as 'a positive, affective bond and investment in another's well-being'. From the perspective of a mother, she highlights how her daughter's dignity is threatened through being disabled and asserts 'it is only with care, and care of the highest quality, that she can be included, loved, and allowed to live a joyful and dignified life' (Kittay, 2011:52). However, care has also been implicated in the oppression of disabled people. Kittay (2011b:53) highlights how care-based ethics have been criticised as being 'unsuitable for an ethic of inclusion'. She draws on the argument of the representation of dependency in care-based ethics which highlights power inequalities that disabled people have tried for a long time to discard. For example, care has been represented by the Disabled People's Movement as a 'barrier to the emancipation and independence of disabled people' as it places disability as a state of dependency (Hughes, McKie, Hopkins & Watson, 2005:260). Kröger (2009:398) emphasises how the ideology and practice of care have led to the disempowerment of disabled people and the assumption that people with disabilities are powerless and 'unable to exert choice and control'. Morris (1997) also rejected the concept of care claiming it is a form of oppression as this viewpoint does not encourage independent living. She suggests the philosophy of care leads to the infantilization of disabled people and the creation of passive recipients unable to make their own decisions.

Nevertheless, Kittay (2011b:54) argues that all people, as they move through life-stages and various health conditions, are dependent on others and suggests 'the fact that the disabled person requires the assistance of a caregiver is not the exception'. She calls for the recognition and embracement of dependence on others which reduces isolation and loneliness and provides connections to others which makes lives meaningful. Yet, as Tronto (1998) recognises the mutual dependence of human life, she emphasises we choose not to acknowledge our own vulnerability as this may be viewed as a weakness.

Tronto (1998) suggests returning the word ethics to its original meaning – knowledge about how to live a good life. She highlights the dual meanings of care as the disposition of concern and the actions we take as a result of these concerns. An ethic of care in research implies considering the needs of others and viewing other perspectives. It involves a continuous reflection on power differentials and adjustments to the needs of others. The idea of an ethics of care is not just a tool for framing the discussion presented here but also one that underpinned the research process through my relations with the participants and the representation of their voices. My responsibility to the research participants was a key consideration throughout the process and this will be described below.

### 3.3 Participants: recruitment, responsibilities and ethical considerations

This study was granted ethical approval from the University of Glasgow and my own organisation prior to the commencement of the research. Recruitment occurred via email from PGCE programme leaders other than me to avoid student teachers feeling any pressure to volunteer to participate. Doing research within my own department, it was important to consider the status of my role and not to make the student teachers feel as though they were 'captive' (Ferguson, Myrick & Yonge, 2006:58). I was concerned that student teachers who I have direct responsibility for might feel obligated to participate in my research. However, I did not want to exclude them from participating should they want to. To try to alleviate the power relations at play, I asked a colleague to invite participants through an email to all PGCE students, including those whom I have direct responsibility for. On receipt of interest, I then followed up with a participant information sheet and the offer of a meeting to discuss any queries prior to the interviews taking place. The Participant Information Sheet (PIS) explained what the participants could expect in terms of involvement in the project, the gathering and storage of data and the right to withdraw. It also included the contact details of my doctoral supervisor. Participants provided verbal and written consent prior to commencement of the

interviews. Participants were informed that personal data would be destroyed in accordance with Data Protection legislation (2018) and that real names would be pseudonymised in the writing up of the research.

Participants were not offered any financial remuneration for participating in the research, however benefits of participating, including the opportunity to talk and reflect on their own experiences, were highlighted in the PIS. This is in line with the guidance from the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018:4) which state that research 'should aim to maximise benefit and minimise harm' and aligns with an ethic of care which 'rests on the premise of non-violence – that no one should be hurt' (Gilligan, 2003:174). Although no harm was anticipated, I did consider that participants may raise issues that are sensitive to them. In this instance I had prepared a range of options for how the participant would like to proceed. These options included the opportunity to terminate the interview, continue at a later date, or end their involvement at that point. I also prepared an information sheet highlighting support services available both internally and externally should the participant require signposting to another professional to discuss any sensitive issues. Fortunately, this was not required but I felt reassured that I had considered my duty of care (BERA, 2018) and felt fully prepared for the possibility of referring a participant on for support. It was also important to inform participants of situations which may mean overriding confidentiality, for example, in the case of a safeguarding matter. No such case arose.

Clough & Nutbrown (2007:24) highlight the importance of looking at the subject area through 'different lenses' and the views of the participants will be used to inform change in ITE programmes within my organisation. However, doing research in your place of work raises issues and these will be explored next.

### 3.4 Researcher identity: insider or outsider?

There are both potential strengths and limitations to doing research in your own organisation. By being employed by the company I am researching in I have an intimate knowledge of the setting and a familiarity with the participants, so it is important to reflect on my positionality within the research. The researcher's position can be described as an insider or an outsider. The idea of insider/outsider status relates to how much the researcher is situated either inside or outside the group being researched, in relation to shared experiences or membership of the group (Gair, 2012). As an internal researcher

my status as a teacher educator with student teacher participants, I was part insider, part outsider as although I am part of the organisation, I do not share the identity of student teacher. Dwyer & Buckle (2009:54) agree that there is a space that 'allows researchers to occupy the position of both insider and outsider rather than insider or outsider'. How much of an insider I was also depended on the commonalities shared with participants. For example, when interviewing student teachers who I already had a history with through having taught them, a rapport had previously been developed and could be expanded upon during the interview. However, a potential downside of a previous relationship with the participants could be that knowing something of my values may result in the participant providing answers that they feel would be acceptable to me. The way the knowledge is constructed is dependent on the 'relationships of power' and influence what becomes 'known' (Milligan, 2016:241). Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane & Muhamad (2001) highlight the importance of negotiating power in the research process. The desire to equalise the anticipated power differential between both parties in order to minimise the conflict of status was considered when planning how to conduct the interviews. I made it clear at the start of each interview both verbally and in writing that in that space I was there as a researcher and whatever they said to me would have no impact on their studies.

Hellawell (2006:489) highlights that the same researcher can slide along the 'insider-outsider continuum' throughout the research process. Common experiences, for example, having taught autistic learners and identifying with the stories of the participants also supported how far along the continuum of insider researcher I felt. Shared experiences of struggles with leadership and management when trying to adjust practice to support the inclusion of autistic learners was something I identified with and contributed to my feelings of 'insider' as I felt an empathy with the participants. Milligan (2016:239) argues that we are 'neither entirely one identity nor another; neither fully inside nor outside'. The position we take as researcher depends upon the context we find ourselves in, our familiarity with the surroundings and the established socio-cultural norms. Positionality is 'determined by where one stands in relation to "the other". More importantly, these positions can shift' (Merriam *et al.*, 2001: 411). The co-construction of the narratives were unique; every interview was different with some participants sharing more personal details than others. My own positioning shifted as a result of what the participants shared. For example, during a particularly emotional reflection by one participant where she had been moved by the recollection of telling her personal story, I, engrossed in her account, felt an empathy with her. Empathy – the capacity to understand another's feelings – has been acknowledged as an essential characteristic of effective interviewing

(Chirban, 1996). The intimate nature of a one-to-one interview 'is deeply personal' and 'cultivates a relationship between the interviewer and interviewee' (Minikel-Lacocque, 2019:1040). In line with an ethic of care, caring for the participant 'involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into the other's' (Noddings, 1986:24). The mutual exchange between the researcher and the participant is paramount. When we care, it is important that the other person's viewpoint is listened to and respected and that the participants' voices are represented in an ethical manner. Results presented in a non-caring way can jeopardise the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Bergmark, 2019). How I ensured a caring approach to data collection methods and process, along with ensuring 'goodness' in research, will be covered in the following section.

### 3.5 Method of data collection – interviews

Qualitative research is 'a form of social inquiry' (Hammersley, 2013:12). Based on experiences and people's understanding of them, interpretive research contends that knowledge and truth are subjective and informed by cultural and historical backgrounds (Ryan, 2018). Concerned with understanding perspectives of participants, a qualitative, interpretive approach was utilised. In line with an ethic of care, participants are human beings who should not be objects of research but human beings with whom we create a connection. It 'requires that we learn from and listen to others, thus enabling us to better respond to their needs' (Ramdas, 2016:846). Rejecting a positivist epistemology which suggest that there is one 'objective reality "out there"' (Gray, 2014:18) and that the researcher exists externally to the social world they are researching, the post-positivist interpretivist perspectives claim there are many truths created by the participants' interactions in their social world and that the researcher is part of the world they are researching. Although qualitative research may not be able to 'provide the mirror reflection of the social world that positivists strive for' (Miller & Glassner, in Silverman, 2004:126), it does enable the exploration of people's experiences and the meanings they attribute to these. Qualitative research is contextual. The participants' worlds are socially constructed and unique to the individual. With this in mind, to obtain rich data to add to an understanding of this particular context, one to one interviews was the method used to collect data.

Krauss (2005) advocates the flexibility of interviews as a way of understanding people's worlds. I used semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of student teachers and to examine their experiences of preparing to teach autistic learners whilst on the PGCE programme. Interviews cannot be viewed as 'objective accounts of the interviewee's reality' (Garton & Copland, 2010:533), rather the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee is a jointly constructed dialogue. As the data comes only from what the participants tell the researcher it is suitable for gaining data on opinions and attitudes (Denscombe, 2014). Miller & Glassner (in Silverman, 2004:125) highlight the argument that narratives created between an interviewer and interviewee are not representative of 'some "truth" in the world' but 'invented ... to fit the demands of the interactive context of the interview, and representative of nothing more or less'. However, perspectives of status can have a significant impact on the quality of the interview (King, Horrocks & Brooks, 2019). People respond differently depending on how they perceive the interviewer (Denscombe, 2014). The participants were also students on the programmes I teach on and due to this fiduciary relationship of unequal power there was a danger that the participants could answer the questions in a way they think is socially desirable and not aligned with their daily behaviour (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Lincoln & Guba (1985:257) assert 'the ultimate credibility of the outcomes depends upon the extent to which trust has been established'. Explaining the goals of the research and reiterating that participation would have no impact on the participants' studies supported a more collaborative process. It was important to try to relax the participant through building up a rapport; however, it was equally necessary not to use my dominant position as the researcher to invade the participant's privacy through masquerading 'as a friend to get the information' (Kvale, 2006:497) needed. The intimate nature of the interview between two people provides a basis for an ethics of care. Denscombe (2014) suggests trust and rapport are key to enable the interviewee to open up on the topic, so interviewing requires the researcher to be fully present to another human being. This connection with another, who has given their time and their story to the researcher, should be respected and cared for and reported in a way that others may benefit (Donalek, 2005).

The first four of the ten interviews were held in a small meeting room at the college where I work and where the participants study. This familiarity with the surroundings aided in relaxing the participants which I hoped would enable them to be more forthcoming with their responses than if they had been in an unfamiliar setting. Seating arrangements supported a non-confrontational approach – facing each other but at an angle (Gray, 2014:379). Due to the impact of a global pandemic during the data collection

phase I sought permission from the University of Glasgow's Ethics Committee to add an alternative method of data collection. Zoom, a popular video conferencing platform able to securely record sessions, was used in place of face-to-face interviews and I conducted audio-only interviews from my home. Although not ideal, this substitution allowed me to continue to collect data and include those participants who had agreed to take part prior to lockdown but whose interviews were postponed due to college closures. Interviewing people online during a global pandemic where there has been much disruption to people's lives was carefully considered. The well-being of the participants had to be the first consideration. It would not be appropriate to put anyone under additional stress in these circumstances. However, I still wanted to give those who had said they would like to participate an opportunity to do so. I was also able to recruit participants this way. The convenience of being able to participate without having to leave the house and the flexibility this enabled through not being restricted to college opening hours may have been more attractive to some research participants than face to face interviews (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, & Lawless, 2019).

In addition to the signed consent form, participants reaffirmed consent verbally at the start of the interview. King *et al*. (2019) suggest starting the interview with a simple, unthreatening question to help develop rapport. I had prepared the questions and reviewed these with my supervisor prior to submitting to the ethics committee which allowed me to create neutral, non-leading questions and I started the interview with an easy question to put the participants at ease. This interview guide was used as an orientation, however, during each interview I would deviate from the sequence of questions in response to the dialogue of the participant. This mode of enquiry allowed for a certain freedom during the interview process to probe. Flick (2011) states the importance of the interviewer using probes at apposite moments to lead the discussion into further depth. However, King *et al*. (2019) suggest that you can probe too much, for example, through spending a lot of time probing in an area that has limited relevance to the research project. I was aware of this possibility and kept my interview prompt in front of me to ensure we had enough time to cover all of the questions. When all questions were covered it was important to bring the interview to a supportive conclusion. King *et al*. (2019) recommend easing the participant out by handing over control to the participant as much as possible. This was achieved by focusing on future changes or developments they would like to see and by asking them if there was anything else they would like to add. Each interview ended by thanking the participants for their time and their involvement in the study.

'Interviews are a sensitive and powerful method' of collecting data (Kvale, 2006:497). Through instigating conversation, they can 'have therapeutic value and offer participants an outlet to reflect on experiences and share feelings with a neutral, interested party' (Rossetto, 2014:484) and may even act as an agent of change through reflection on own lived experiences. Crouch & McKenzie (2006:487) suggest interviews can generate new knowledge or self-understanding for the respondents and 'this knowledge may also include better insight into the social conditions of their lives'. This is significant as it provides a space for the student teachers to 'speak of and for themselves' (Wrench & Garret, 2015:215) about a programme designed by others in a more authoritative position.

**3.6 'Goodness'**

Interpretive decisions were made at each stage of the research process. To achieve rigour and ensure trustworthiness in the research I utilised Guba's (1981) four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility replaces the more positivist term *internal validity*. To demonstrate credibility, it is important to be transparent about the research process. After the interviews had taken place, manual transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews were completed using transcription software. To ensure accuracy, the transcription was then listened to repeatedly alongside reading the text and manual changes were made to correct words the software had misread. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and have been reported in this way with the exception of fillers such as '*erm*' and '*you know*' which were removed when presenting the data when this did not add anything to the meaning. I was also conscious that being represented in this way may be considered as a negative depiction of the participants' voice (Dearnley, 2005). During transcription, I added features of oral discourse to the written language, for example, full stops and commas. Bulholtz (2000) refers to this as 'naturalized' transcription and called this practice 'literacized'. The inclusion of punctuation and the removal of fillers supports the reader to access the text in a more reader friendly way (Davidson, 2009). So, although transcription is a selective process and the analysis of the transcripts an iterative one, my own positionality is acknowledged in the research report. A limitation of the transcripts produced may be that member checks were not sought although all participants were reminded at interview that they could view their transcripts should they choose to. No-one took the opportunity to do this.

To ensure transferability, the term used in place of *generalisability*, I have made it clear that my research is not intended to be representative of student teachers everywhere but focuses on the views of student teachers in a very specific context. In an interpretive paradigm, 'all social/behavioral phenomena are context- bound' (Guba, 1981:86). Findings are situated not only in space but also in time. This study is limited to student teachers on the PGCE programme in the present and previous year. There is no one 'truth' which has general applicability. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit depth of insight needed to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of student teachers on the PGCE programme in my own educational establishment. The research, although small-scale in a particular educational organisation, may be easily replicable in another setting due to transparency in the process and the 'thick descriptions' provided (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:214). I have strived to be as transparent as possible regarding my methods through describing each step in the process. Dependability, rather than *reliability*, refers to 'the processes whereby data were collected and analyzed, and interpretations were made' (Guba, 1981:87). This is established through an audit trail. In line with ethical guidelines, all de-identified data will be held and made available to other researchers should they desire.

Confirmability replaces *objectivity* and is 'established when credibility, transferability, and dependability are all achieved' (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017:3). Interpretive researchers cannot remove themselves from the data and be objective and this requires the researcher to show how they arrived at their conclusions. Guba (1981) suggests practising reflexivity to reveal to the audience underlying epistemological assumptions of the researcher. Reflexivity has been described by Hellawell (2006:483) as 'deliberate self-scrutiny in relation to the research process'. The notion of reflexivity 'recognises that researchers are inescapably part of the social world that they are researching' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007:171). Ontology is the nature of reality from my perspective as a researcher and it is important to state my own ontological position. Acknowledging and disclosing my own values, attitudes and perceptions are essential in the research process. As Northway (2009) advises, decisions regarding methodology have been made explicit and processes are transparent in order to improve research practice. The following section will outline and describe the data analysis strategy.

### 3.7 Data analysis

In order to outline the process of data analysis in as transparent a way as possible, I will describe the methods used and reflect on decisions made as the research process developed. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is an iterative process that categorises patterns of meaning across the data (Cluley, 2018). It is a reflexive, inductive method involving visiting and revisiting the data to spark insight and develop meaning (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009) from patterns that 'emerge out of the data' (Patton, 1980:306). There are various ways of theming data and this was driven by my research questions and how I interpreted the data according to my own subjective perspectives (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). As Kiernan (1999:43) highlights, although grounded in the experience and views of participants it is the researcher 'who determines the overall research questions, and the researcher who … interprets data and draws conclusions'. Choices made about what quotes to use from transcriptions to report the research findings are also subjective ones. To look for patterns in the data it was important to consider all participants' voices and highlight how these have been themed and analysed. Gray (2014:194) suggests the addition of ensuring authenticity within qualitative research through being aware of the multiple voices within the data and the subtle, sometimes conflicting realities within it. To support analysis, I immersed myself in the data through listening to audio recordings time and again. Through thorough and repetitive listening, I sought to faithfully interpret what was heard with 'honesty and integrity' (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007:95).

I utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide to thematically analyse the interviews. These steps are: 1) familiarisation with data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining themes and 6) producing the report. However, although this model is presented as a linear process, Lincoln & Guba (1985:249) warn against research steps as linear and suggest the focus should instead be on adapting and reviewing the data with 'continuous feedback and feedforward'. So, the process of analysis was iterative, meaning there was movement between the phases.

The first time I analysed the data I went through the following process. The first step, familiarisation with the data, was achieved through transcription and repeated listening to the audio recordings before starting the next step, the process of coding. Coding is the process of converting data into themes or ideas that are connected (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). This step involved colour coding and adding brief comments of what I found interesting and how this relates to my research question to a separate notebook. I added codes to post-it notes to enable me to move them around when considering how the data linked to each other. Visual representations in the form of mind-maps were created and

evolved through the process to support me to see how themes linked to each other and to the overall aims of the research. This documentation of decisions made also supported 'an auditable decision trail' (Nowell *et al.*, 2017:1) which is imperative to demonstrating transparency, rigour and trustworthiness, these decisions are explicated in further detail in tables below. Topics emerged as I became immersed in the data and this supported the third step, searching for themes. Themes were organised in relation to the research questions which I used to guide analysis. For example, under the theme of inclusion all codes related to the topic of inclusion were included. Extracts that could go into more than one theme were placed in both. However, other themes that emerged through this process, for example the theme of learning support assistants, were also included.

In addition to listening to the audio recordings repeatedly and creating mind maps to see connections between transcripts I utilised Nvivo (version 12) to manage the data and coding process. This was more effective than doing it manually because as there was a considerable amount of data there was a high margin for human error. Nvivo was useful as a tool to support the organisation of datasets as I was able to pre-assign categories, known as 'nodes' in the programme which enabled me to see how the various categories were related to each other. I could then view the selected sections of data from all the participants under one heading which aided in the creation of themes and supported quick search and retrieval of data. I initially identified twenty-eight codes, see table 1, which were then grouped into overarching themes in relation to the research questions in an attempt to group the minutiae of empirical data into broader concepts.

**Table 1.**

| Code | Number of participants that mentioned them | Number of references |
|---|---|---|
| **1. PGCE** | 10 | 94 |
| **2. Inclusion** | 10 | 91 |
| **3. Teaching Practice** | 10 | 74 |
| **4. Autism** | 10 | 68 |
| **5. Behaviour** | 10 | 63 |
| **6. Learning** | 10 | 61 |
| **7. Identity** | 10 | 55 |
| **8. Learning Support Assistants** | 10 | 35 |
| **9. Collaboration** | 9 | 43 |
| **10. Relationships** | 9 | 37 |
| **11. Post-compulsory contexts** | 9 | 32 |
| **12. Personal experience** | 8 | 46 |
| **13. Labels and settings** | 8 | 36 |
| **14. Disability** | 8 | 24 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **15. Communication** | 6 | 28 |
| **16. Funding** | 6 | 10 |
| **17. Sensory** | 4 | 35 |
| **18. Organisation** | 4 | 14 |
| **19. Media** | 4 | 11 |
| **20. Literal interpretation** | 4 | 7 |
| **21. Barriers** | 3 | 12 |
| **22. Culture** | 3 | 12 |
| **23. Stereotypes** | 3 | 10 |
| **24. Change and transition** | 3 | 4 |
| **25. Ofsted** | 3 | 5 |
| **26. Battle** | 2 | 12 |
| **27. Self-esteem** | 2 | 5 |
| **28. Bullying** | 1 | 4 |

The smaller codes were then grouped into overarching themes and sub-themes.

**Table 2.**

| Theme | Sub-themes | Codes included |
|---|---|---|
| **Learning** | Identity<br>Personal experience<br>PGCE | Battles and barriers<br>Media<br>Stereotypes<br>Teaching practice |
| **Collaboration** | Learning Support Assistants<br>Relationships | Relationships |
| **Autism** | Communication and interaction<br>Sensory and behaviour | Literal interpretation<br>Organisation<br>Change and transition |
| **Inclusion** | Labels and settings<br>Post-compulsory contexts | Self-esteem<br>Funding<br>Ofsted<br>Disability<br>Bullying<br>Culture |

However, the data analysis process was more complicated than originally anticipated. Throughout this process, I was led by my research questions, looking for commentary relating to the participants' knowledge of autism and whether they felt the PGCE had supported them to develop their knowledge of inclusion and supporting autistic learners. Trying to make the data fit into my research questions had caused me to perhaps lose sight of the full detail of what the participants had told me. Following a break from

analysis due to increased work demands relating to the global pandemic, I had a conversation with my supervisor about my findings and the struggle I was having with organising and presenting the findings. She suggested going back to the transcripts to really listen to what the participants had to say and be guided by that. I then returned to the transcripts with fresh eyes and I focused on the narrative of the participants without trying to answer my research questions. I again used Nvivo software (version 12) and used open codes, meaning I did not have pre-set codes but developed these as I worked through the coding process (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) to code the data. I examined each transcript again and added nodes as they presented themselves. I used descriptive codes, words derived directly from the text (Glaser, 2016), for example the word 'anxiety' which was mentioned by four out of ten participants in relation to autistic learners (appendix D). This helped to identify some of the obvious patterns. Alongside this, I also used codes I considered to relate to the core meaning of participants' accounts, for example under the code 'support' I added comments that related to being supported. These comments included 'guidance', specialist advice' and 'I would go to my mentor'. Organising, coding and theming the data the second time around was a bit disconcerting. Although some themes relevant to the research questions remained consistent I worried that there were codes coming up that I had not noticed on the first attempt, for example, concerns over professional competency had not been acknowledged when half of the participants mentioned this. This is likely because I was not looking for this and therefore omitted it from my original coding. Revisiting the data was also a way of considering how my own assumptions in relation to the research questions may have been shaping this interpretive process. This time around, some codes, for example, concerns over mainstream or specialist education and whether all PGCE programmes should cater for the inclusion of autistic learners appeared more apparent. Codes relating to the PGCE were separated into 'classroom practice' and 'PGCE lessons' as I felt this better captured the difference between individual experiences of teaching practice and what they felt they had gained from taught sessions. This time forty-three codes were identified. See table 3 below.

**Table 3.**

| Code | Number of participants that mentioned them | Number of references |
|---|---|---|
| **Classroom practice** | 10 | 61 |
| **Autism** | 10 | 47 |
| **Inclusion** | 10 | 35 |
| **Support** | 10 | 34 |
| **Career** | 10 | 30 |
| **Behaviour** | 9 | 52 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Curriculum** | 9 | 22 |
| **PGCE lessons** | 8 | 56 |
| **Communication** | 8 | 34 |
| **Mainstream or specialist provision** | 8 | 30 |
| **Diagnosis** | 6 | 10 |
| **LSAs** | 6 | 21 |
| **Learning** | 6 | 16 |
| **Sharing information** | 6 | 13 |
| **Professional competency** | 5 | 14 |
| **Strategies** | 5 | 13 |
| **Disability** | 5 | 8 |
| **Differentiation** | 5 | 7 |
| **Sensory differences** | 4 | 21 |
| **Relationships with learners** | 4 | 14 |
| **Failure** | 4 | 7 |
| **Funding** | 4 | 7 |
| **Time** | 4 | 7 |
| **Pressure** | 4 | 6 |
| **Anxiety** | 4 | 5 |
| **Ofsted** | 3 | 4 |
| **Resources** | 3 | 4 |
| **Media** | 2 | 6 |
| **Fight for support** | 2 | 9 |
| **Stereotype** | 2 | 6 |
| **Management** | 2 | 5 |
| **Employment** | 2 | 4 |
| **Exclusion** | 2 | 2 |
| **Socio-economic background** | 2 | 2 |
| **Organisation** | 1 | 6 |
| **Bullying** | 1 | 4 |
| **Change** | 1 | 2 |
| **Rights** | 1 | 2 |
| **Neurodiversity** | 1 | 1 |
| **Targets** | 1 | 1 |
| **Workload** | 1 | 1 |

The next step was to review, define and formalise the themes. Using Nvivo to code and theme the data enabled me to see main themes and sub-themes by grouping the coded data with and across participants' transcripts. Being able to see the data in this way supported the development of connections between what the participants had said and to consider the meaning of the prominent features in the data. The example, added to table 4 below, shows the code of 'professional competency'. This was then grouped together with the larger sub-theme of 'career' in the overall theme of 'experiences on the PGCE'.

**Table 4.**

| Theme | Sub-theme | Code | Participant | Evidence |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Experiences on the PGCE | Career | Professional competency | Pat | Thinking that it felt like a time in my life where I have developed and gained a great deal of, you know, knowledge and life experience and professional experience. And so, I felt personally as if I had the professional competence to be able to do that.<br><br>So steep, steep, steep learning curve. But a kind of even like the fact that, you know, I did have quite a high-profile career and what I did what I did. But no one knows that, I can just be just be Pat again. You know, in some ways it's a bit weird cause it makes you realise how much of your view of yourself is around your professional life. But in other ways, it's quite liberating and finding who I am again for her. |
| Experiences on the PGCE | Career | Professional competency | Sarah | I did the placement here at college because I've never worked with that age group before and they terrified me. Now they're fine. |
| Experiences on the PGCE | Career | Professional competency | Suzy | I think, more confident about where my role as a tutor lies.<br><br>I do have also, in terms of learners with specific learning difficulties I feel that I have learned a lot. And I've got still got a huge amount to learn, but I'm developing my skills and experience in how to help learners who have specific difficulties. So that's what really attracts me to this as well, because as a you know, I'm not a specialist trainee or teacher of learners with learning difficulties, but I do have learners with learning difficulties in my classes of a number of different types, actually.<br><br>And why couldn't I see that? And it's because I haven't had the experience of the practice of working with somebody with those specific issues or difficulties.<br><br>It's quite it takes a bit of kind of practice and thought and experience. I suppose that comes with experience isn't it and that's what I've found. I've learned a lot and still learning a lot about with any learner about where they are now and then where they could be. And being realistic about that without either holding them back or pushing them too much and not that's the bit that I feel, I'm you know, I'm developing, but I'm not there yet. And maybe you never are completely as a tutor. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | I learned as it for myself as a tutor and that learner's tutor, I learned that, and it comes with experience, doesn't it? That I, next time, if I'm in a similar situation, I'll stand my ground more because I'm know more now. And I can say, well, actually, I think that because this learner is like this and this is what's how he is, I think he's going to struggle with that. So, I'll know that more now. But I just wish that I've known it before.<br><br>Because we're not specialists I suppose at the end of the day.<br><br>I mean I would definitely tell them first that I'm not a specialist and I haven't done a specialist course in, you know, supporting learners with autism.<br><br>I think the fact that somebody can come back to learning at whatever age as an adult and take part in a class, is capable of very able to take part in a mainstream class of learning is fantastic. But that means that the tutor needs to be quite skilled in how to manage that. So, I think it's fantastic. But I think as a tutor, you, there is a lot to learn really and but that's part of the reason why I love the job. |
| Experiences on the PGCE | Career | Professional competency | Paul | I think that you have to include everybody, then you're on the right track. I wouldn't say I'm great at it. I've still got a lot to learn but two and a half years in I think I'm a hell of a lot better than what I was before.<br><br>I'm not trained in that field. All I know is if he gets put under pressure, he changes, you know? So, I don't know how you cope with it. |
| Experiences on the PGCE | Career | Professional competency | Diane | That's what I felt that I was not trained how to support emotionally when there's a little crisis with an autistic learner. |

The smaller codes were grouped and linked to overarching sub-themes. Although some codes were only mentioned by one participant, I felt these linked to other experiences and did not discount their relevance. Also, although the key codes and how representative they were are listed in the tables above, this should be viewed with caution as frequency is not a measure of meaning or value. This is something Krane, Andersen & Strean (1997:215) warn of as they point out 'the rare experience may be the most enlightening one'. For example, although sensory differences were only mentioned by four out of ten participants, the detailed insights from the personal experiences are

informative and insightful. Also, although only one participant mentioned bullying in relation to autism, this concern is worth exploring.

When considering the relevancy of the frequency of what I had coded 'career', which was mentioned by all the participants, I was aware that the reason for the high incidence of this was related to the first question I asked at the start of each interview taking place. In order to relax the participant, I had asked them why they decided to do a PGCE. I considered removing this data from the analysis when going through the data reduction phase (Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, I thought it relevant to the participants' journey as attitudes and behaviour may be shaped by experience. For example, Robert and Diane had worked in care settings with autistic children and adults for years before deciding to come into teaching and this would have informed their knowledge and understanding of autism.

Through sorting, exploring commonalities and combining and grouping these codes, three master themes emerged. These themes were: experiences on the PGCE; perceptions and experience of autistic learners; and inclusion. These categories were used to inform the nature and organisation of the findings. Table 5 below outlines the different codes that made up these themes.

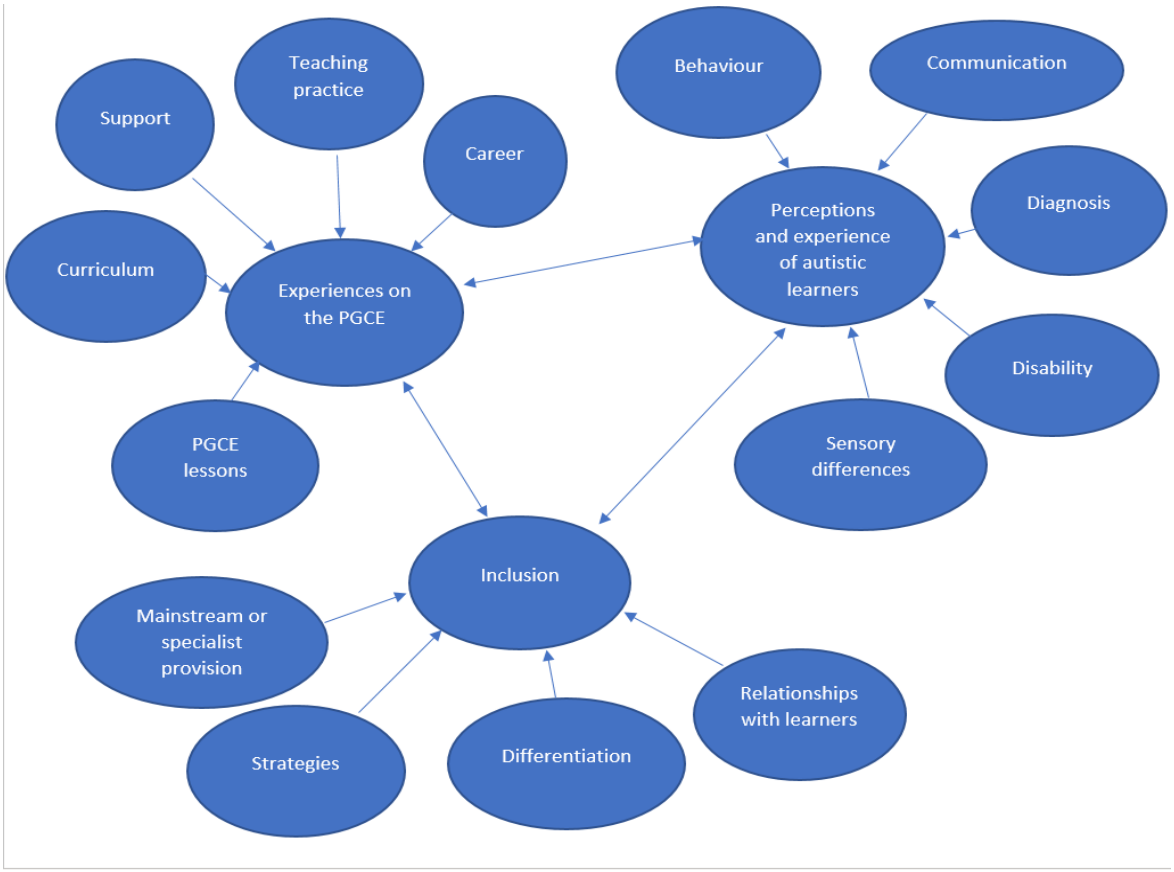
**Table 5.**

| Theme | Sub-themes | Codes included |
|---|---|---|
| **Experiences on the PGCE** | Career<br>Classroom practice<br>Relationships<br>Curriculum<br>PGCE lessons | LSAs<br>Learning<br>Sharing information<br>Professional competency<br>Failure<br>Funding<br>Time<br>Pressure<br>Ofsted<br>Resources<br>Management<br>Socio-economic background<br>Workload |
| **Perceptions and experience of autistic learners** | Behaviour<br>Communication<br>Diagnosis<br>Disability<br>Sensory differences | Anxiety<br>Media<br>Stereotype<br>Strategies<br>Differentiation<br>Organisation |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | Change<br>Neurodiversity<br>Targets |
| **Inclusion** | Mainstream or specialist provision<br>Relationships with learners | Fight for support<br>Employment<br>Exclusion<br>Bullying<br>Rights<br>Targets |

A number of codes were relevant to multiple themes, for example, both 'learning' and 'sharing information' could be linked to 'classroom practice' and 'support' but equally could be concerned with learning about autism or being supported to plan for differentiation. In this way the categorising of data was fluid and involved subjective decisions on my behalf arrived at by re-reading the transcripts and reflecting through contemplation and note-making. Initially, I had sought to separate the themes of 'learning' and 'collaboration' but on reflection and following the second coding process, the themes of learning, classroom practice and support were interlinked in the narratives so I combined these into one overarching theme of 'experiences on the PGCE'.

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the mind-map created when analysing the data.



This write up was the final step in Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance. Each theme will be discussed in succession and exemplified by direct quotations from participants as Braun & Clarke (2006) suggest the inclusion of raw data extracts supports the validity of the analysis. I will present the stronger themes first and these will provide the structure for the following chapter. Before I present the findings, I will summarise participants' information.

### 3.8 Participant group

In this section, I provide a brief overview of the participants, the pathway they were studying, whether they were already in a teaching role, labelled in-service, or not employed as a teacher, labelled pre-service. I also briefly summarise their experience of autism.

There were ten participants in total. Out of these ten, all the participants had at least some experience teaching or supporting autistic learners either prior to starting their teaching qualification or during their teaching placement. The teaching sector is disproportionately female (DfE, 2020) and this is reflected in my respondents where eight out of ten people interviewed were female. Four of the participants, Robert, Melanie, Diane and Isla, did the Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD) pathway whilst the others were doing either the Maths, English or Young People and Adults routes. The following table (6) provides a summary of relevant contextual information of the participants. Being aware of my responsibility to protect the participants' identity, I have provided an overview to help the reader get acquainted with the participants.

**Table 6**

| Pseudonym | Pathway | In-service or pre-service | Gender | Experience of autism |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Diane** | Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD) | Pre-service | Female | Works as a learning support assistant in an independent specialist college for learners on the autism spectrum. Has worked in care settings with autistic children and adults for more than thirty years |
| **Isla** | Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD) | Pre-service | Female | Recently graduated with an MA in autism. Has a younger brother on the autism spectrum. On teaching placement within a further |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | education college in a foundation learning department. |
| **Melanie** | Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD) | Pre-service | Female | Recent graduate. Works as a teaching assistant in an independent specialist school for learners on the autism spectrum. |
| **Michelle** | Young People and Adult Specialists | In-service | Female | Works in a further education college teaching sport. Has been teaching for two years following graduation from master's degree. |
| **Pat** | English Literacy and Language Specialists | Pre-service | Female | On teaching placement within an adult community learning centre and a further education college. Previously held leadership and management roles in a different sector. Has personal experience of autism through a close friend's son. |
| **Paul** | Young People and Adult Specialists | In-service | Male | Works in a further education college teaching a vocational subject after many years working in industry. Has been teaching for two and half years. |
| **Robert** | Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD) | Pre-service | Male | Has a personal diagnosis of autism. Identifies as autistic. Has extensive experience of supporting autistic learners in both care and educational settings. Has children on the autism spectrum. On teaching placement within a further education college in a foundation learning department. |
| **Sarah** | Mathematics and Numeracy Specialists | Pre-service | Female | On teaching placement within an adult community learning centre and a further education college. Previously worked in the health sector and sits on the disability committee within her organisation. |
| **Sophie** | Young People and Adult Specialists | Pre-service | Female | Recent graduate. On teaching placement within a further education college in an art department. |
| **Suzy** | English Literacy and Language Specialists | In-service | Female | Works at an adult community learning centre. Has been teaching for ten years following a career change. |

Noddings (2002) wrote of reciprocity and the importance of care being returned to complete the caring relationship. Within the context of the relationships I have with the individuals who contributed to my study, it is my responsibility, as the carer, to ensure I have listened and attended to the dialogue of the 'cared-for', the participants, and presented this in a way that cares for them. To present the findings and elaborate on personal accounts, verbatim data is used to illustrate, to explain and to present the participants' voices. When considering the data, I had to bear in mind the possible bias for fore fronting the voice of those participants who had comparable experiences of working in autism specific provisions and who have similar opinions to my own. Noddings (1992:87) highlights 'teachers cannot help being more attracted to children who share their own occupations' and as a teacher-researcher I felt the same prejudice might unconsciously apply. Though an ethical disposition of care, being consciously aware of this possibility supported a balance of viewpoints to be presented from all participants.

# Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter will present my findings in three distinct sections. The first section reports on the participants' experiences on the PGCE. It will start with an overview of participants' descriptions on their careers and describe various contexts and curriculum in the post-compulsory sector they teach in. It will consider feelings of professional competency as expressed in the interviews. This first section will then present findings in relation to classroom practice, the importance of support and reflections on the content of PGCE lessons in relation to teaching autistic learners.

The next section outlines perceptions and experiences of autism as reported by the participants. This section will start with an overview of perceptions of autism and disability and will be followed by the key concern of behaviour and the importance of adapting communication as described by the participants. Accounts of sensory differences will also be presented.

The final section presents findings with respect to attitudes towards inclusion in the post-compulsory sector; this will include discussion of opinions towards specialist, and what is termed 'mainstream', provision. This section will also report findings of how the participants described differentiation and strategies to include autistic learners. This chapter will conclude with participants' accounts of relationships with learners and how the participants felt this to be significant to the role of a teacher in supporting inclusion.

## 4.1 Experiences on the post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE) programme

The participants were very different from each other in terms of subject area, previous careers and knowledge and experience of teaching with some coming into teaching straight from finishing undergraduate degrees whilst others had many years' experience in vocational settings prior to starting their PGCE. The overall findings from this section will demonstrate that all of the participants enjoyed teaching and felt they gained valuable experience from teaching practice, however they were concerned about funding for resources, the pressures of workload, and lack of time impacting on professional competency. Support from placement mentors was seen to be important but the quality of support varied across participants' accounts. Reflections on collaboration with learning support assistants (LSAs) also differed with some participants stating they worked effectively with LSAs whilst for others it was less effectual. Furthermore, there were

occasions where the participants expressed that an LSA should have been available to support a learner but due to lack of resources, this was not available.

There were very clear opinions about the content of the PGCE lessons as to whether autism should be covered in initial teacher education programmes. In general, those who were doing the learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) pathway and or had personal experiences of autism did think autism should be included whilst those on other pathways considered it unnecessary. Each of these matters will be presented in turn, starting with an overview of participants' backgrounds and the settings and curriculums they are teaching in to contextualise the discussion before moving on to the detail of teaching practice, support and collaboration, and thoughts on the content of PGCE lessons.

### 4.1.1 Career

Eight out of the ten participants had come into teaching following previous career paths. A couple of the participants, Melanie and Sophie, came straight into teaching following their undergraduate degree in arts-based subjects. Melanie explained the motivation for pursuing the LDD specialist route:

> *I was doing a dissertation on how drama therapy could help teenagers who are autistic and I just, I dunno from there, I was like, oh, I really want to teach within SEN and specialise around autism.*

Although Melanie's desire to teach was based on theoretical study, Sophie's ambition to get into teaching came from teaching experience on her undergraduate degree. She explained, *'I enjoyed it, you know, engaging with the students and helping them out with their work'* (Sophie).

Both Isla and Michelle came into teaching following master's degrees. Isla's dissertation was on *'autism spectrum disorder and sensory processing disorders'*. Having had some experience in the charitable sector, her ambition was to work in education outreach programmes, and she felt getting a PGCE would give her *'a bit of an edge'* when applying for jobs in this sector. Similarly, Michelle already had some teaching experience but wanted the qualification as she had *'never done anything teaching related'*. Although she did have sports coaching experience and felt '*like sports coaching has really helped me in my teaching'*.

The other participants came into teaching following varied career paths, which is not uncommon in the post-compulsory sector as there is a requirement for teachers with current industry experience in a multitude of vocational subjects (Strebler, Neathey & Tackey, 2005). Paul had worked in the engineering industry for much of his career and came into teaching two and a half years ago. He described his introduction to teaching as being *'thrown in the deep end'*. Although both Paul, Suzy and Sarah had teaching experience prior to starting the PGCE, all felt that the qualification added to their feelings of professional identity with Sarah, having previously completed a PhD in an unrelated subject, stating, *'rather than just sort of teaching, I can now officially be teaching'*. The formality of achieving the qualification also seems to be an impacting factor on why participants chose to study a PGCE. Suzy had worked in a *'civil service policy type role'* until ten years ago when the arrival of her second child sparked a change in direction. She questioned the change in her career in mid-life and even though she had been teaching for the past ten years, she doubted her capabilities of completing a post-graduate qualification. But almost at the end of her programme at the time the interview took place said, *'I can because, you know, why wouldn't you really?'*. Also changing her career after having a successful, high-profile career in a leadership and management capacity, Pat felt she would like to return to *'working with people'*. She explained she wanted a '*new challenge, to do something new and different for the last bit of my working life'* and remarked on the change in direction as a *'fresh start'*. However, this also might have brought about uncomfortable feelings around changing identity as she commented on this shift *'in some ways it's a bit weird cause it makes you realise how much of your view of yourself is around your professional life'*.

Unlike the other participants, prior to coming into teaching both Diane and Robert had extensive experience in care and education settings as support workers for people with a range of disabilities, including autism. Before coming into education, Robert had *'worked in the community with people with learning difficulties'* and was then *'employed as a learning support assistant'* in an FE college. Having completed an introductory teaching course, Robert stated *'I didn't feel like I wanted to fall off a cliff. I wanted to carry on to the next level'*. He described his drive to continue studying as *'a continuation of personal development'*. Similarly, Diane decided to do a PGCE:

> *to become a teacher and to have more involvement in the construction of lessons.… I felt that I could do more than I was doing just being a learning support assistant, you know, and I thought if I could create*

*these lesson plans better, I could make them different and then I could advance.*

Both Diane and Robert's comments demonstrate the desire to advance from LSA to teacher and saw the qualification as a way of achieving this.

The above demonstrates the varied profiles of the participants and why they chose to pursue a teaching career and how the formality of gaining a teaching qualification might support feelings of legitimacy. As previous experience may influence perceptions and attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic learners, it is valuable to highlight the range of backgrounds the participants have prior to starting their PGCE. The next section will contextualise the settings the participants completed their teaching practice in.

### 4.1.2 The post-compulsory sector - curriculum and issues highlighted

This section will start with an overview of curriculum, as described by the participants, in their range of settings, and will provide an overview of their experience of working with autistic learners in these settings. It will then go on to consider some of the limitations impacting on teachers in this sector as experienced and highlighted by the participants. These will include access to funding, lack of resources and the pressure of impending Ofsted visits.

The purpose of post-compulsory education varies but overwhelmingly the content of the curriculum where the student teachers are placed is vocational, preparing learners for the transition to work and to adulthood. Participants taught in a range of post-compulsory provision including specialist schools and colleges, general further education colleges and adult community venues.

The context in which the student teachers were doing their teaching placement may have impacted on their perceptions of inclusion with respect to autistic learners. Diane, Isla, Robert and Melanie, having followed the learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) pathway, had practical experience of teaching autistic learners on their placement in specialist provisions. The curriculum in these placements mainly consisted of '*life skills*' (Isla, Diane and Robert), '*English*' (Isla, Diane, Melanie and Robert), '*maths*' (Diane, Melanie and Robert), *ICT…art…horticulture… travel training, emotional literacy*' (Diane), '*basic cookery skills*' (Robert) and '*communication skills*' (Melanie). Diane's placement was in an independent specialist college for learners on the autism spectrum. Melanie had her first placement in a foundation learning department at a general FE college on a

course created specifically to support young adults on the autism spectrum to transition into college. She then gained employment at an independent specialist school and college for learners on the autism spectrum. Isla and Robert both had placements in a foundation learning department at a general FE college.

Michelle and Paul were employed as teachers within an FE college teaching level 3 vocational qualifications. Sophie was on placement at an FE college, also teaching a level 3 vocational qualification. They each had experience of teaching a couple of autistic learners on vocational courses in engineering, art and sport programmes within an FE college. Suzy had taught a few learners on the autism spectrum whilst teaching English within an adult community college. Pat and Sarah had placements in both FE colleges and adult community education centres but reported that they had not had any experience of teaching autistic learners whilst studying their PGCE. This range of experience reflects the varied contexts teachers in the post-compulsory sector might work in and the different profile of learners they might teach, and this could impact on attitudes towards including autistic learners. However, completing a professional teaching qualification not only means student teachers learn how to teach but being in teaching placements, or already employed as a teacher, they are exposed to the wider concerns of professional practice. Tensions around funding for the sector and the prospect of impending Ofsted visits were among some of the concerns the participants raised, and it is to these concerns I now turn.

*'Making sure that there's an equitable division of resources'* was something Sarah mentioned as vital to inclusion. Suzy and Sarah, both on placement within adult community provision mentioned the importance of accountability for funding received. The main aim of Sarah's provision is to support unemployed people back into work. For one of Sarah's learner's, attendance at maths lessons was driven by a desire to socialise with others. She commented:

> *one of my learners is coming along just for fun. He doesn't want a qualification out of it. It's just he's lonely, he lives on his own and he just wants something to do so it's kind of a social club for him. He's unemployed so we do get funding for him.*

However, once employed, '*we don't get funding for them anymore'*. This comment highlights the importance of social interaction to support the well-being of citizens within the community and the fine balance those with budgetary responsibilities have in managing their provision to ensure access. Sarah highlighted the tight budget and lack of resources available stating:

> *all we have are chairs and a few computers which the charity has paid for, but we really just have chairs and my mentor buys paper and pens and things.*

An indication of these times of austerity, this comment shows how teachers have taken it upon themselves to buy resources out of their own funds to support learning. The stress of teaching in such circumstances was highlighted by Suzy who reflected on her manager's position, saying '*she has a lot of pressures in terms of making sure that the funding that's coming in can be justified'*. Budgetary limitations were mentioned as a barrier to accessing appropriate specialist support by both Pat and Robert. Pat recounted how her friend's son had been offered a placement in a specialist school but that this was within another local authority (LA) and the parents did not have the means to fund transport to enable him to attend. After a court case, the LA was ordered to pay for a taxi to transport the young man to school. Similarly, Robert discussed the issue of funding for travel costs in relation to a learner he was supporting. This learner had a place at college but could not afford the bus fare to get to college or the money to buy meals whilst on campus. Through signposting to other agencies, this learner was able to continue his education, but lack of funding can be a major barrier to learners from low-income families.

Lack of resources for learners to access learning support staff was also highlighted as a concern. Talking about learners in her placement in the Foundation Department of a general FE college, Isla commented *'I think they could really use that one to one support. But, you know, they haven't qualified for it'*. In some cases, the learner has received support at the start of the year, but this is withdrawn perhaps under the guise to support transition but as Michelle commented when this happened in her placement *'it was something about the funding'*.

Funding and lack of resources was not the only issue raised by the participants. Both Suzy and Paul were also concerned about the anticipated Ofsted visits to their organisations. Suzy stated:

> *Ofsted's coming back, we have to show that learners are in the right starting point, that they're making progress from the right starting point. … It's important that Ofsted is happy with what we're doing.*

The stress of impending Ofsted visits was also something Paul commented on in relation to a learner on the autism spectrum that did not take notes in class but would spend evenings working through the materials from the session and making his own notes at

home. He worried that if asked to produce evidence of this learner's progress he would not be able to provide examples of his work. This tension between supporting the learner to use his own strategies and defending this to an Ofsted inspector was not one he felt comfortable with, commenting '*it's very, very difficult. Very difficult'*. This difficulty might partly arise from teachers being unprepared for the inclusion of autistic learners, as in Robert's experience which seems to suggest that special educational needs was not a consideration in the department he worked in until they were given warning of an Ofsted visit. He recalled:

> *there was going to be an Ofsted at the college, they sent this thing round about special educational needs to all the teaching staff and I remember I was sitting reading it and my line manager walked past and he said "what do you think?" I said, "that's interesting but I don't know if you know my background, I've worked for special educational needs for a number of years, so to me, I already have this inside me". You know what I mean? Not saying I know everything but have an awareness of this already. He said "Well, that's great. You know, I mean, you are ahead of the game".*

The comment about being ahead of the game demonstrates that in this situation there are teachers and managers who perhaps do not feel that the inclusion of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities is part of their remit and are not confident in their ability to do so. A written document sent out to teaching staff prior to an Ofsted visit seems to be tokenistic and highlights how inclusion of those with different abilities is sometimes considered an afterthought in education.

Both internal and external pressures impact on staff's time to support learners and the following discussion demonstrates some examples of how these impact on the learners' experiences. Suzy expressed disappointment with a situation involving an autistic learner at her workplace in relation to change. Difficulties when dealing with change and transition is a common characteristic of people on the autism spectrum (Hendrickx, 2015). Clear structure and routine can reduce anxiety for the person and any changes to this routine should be communicated in advance. At the time of the incident Suzy described, multiple changes were happening to the learner's timetable as part of a review of the course programmes and this resulted in the learner dropping out of the course. On reflection Suzy recognised that the learner was not fully prepared for the changes and wondered if only one change to the timetable had been made at a time the learner might have continued to make progress. With regret she commented *'I felt that we kind of*

*failed that learner really*'. She went on to explain how time restrictions impacted on decisions made, that she had '*another twenty learners to get through*' in a very short space of time. How the pressures of the job, the prospect of losing funding and the impending Ofsted inspection could cause staff to '*lose focus*'. She recalled '*it's been quite a lesson really to think, yeah, we might not have a lot of time, but we've got a big responsibility to these learners actually*'.

Time was also a concern for Paul who said '*we have a very tight timeline. We have to get through an awful lot of stuff. It's very academic*'. This perhaps highlights how systems are put in place without regard to the additional time a learner on the autism spectrum might need. Instead, this is an afterthought. For Robert, however, supporting a learner to transition from a long stay hospital to his own flat in the community was an example where the time needed to adjust had been considered and planned to reduce anxiety. These examples might highlight the difference in approaches, goals and values of organisations. Both Paul and Suzy's examples are from general FE colleges, whilst Robert's experience was in a specialist provision. It may be unlikely that the specialist provision had the same pressures to reach previously set retention and achievement targets as the general FE settings, thus allowing for a pace more suited to the learner.

### 4.1.3 Teaching practice

Overall, participants valued the practical experiences of working with autistic learners during their teaching practice. Although the number and range of experience differed, the importance of learning from experience was highlighted and will be explicated in this section.

Although Sarah and Pat had not taught autistic learners during their time on the PGCE, both expressed how much they had learnt from teaching practice in terms of adapting for individuals and responding to learners. Having had two contrasting placements, one in an FE college with 16-19-year-old learners and one in an adult community centre supporting learners back into employment, Sarah talked about how much she had enjoyed working with different cohorts of learners. Comparing her experiences, she suggested the college environment had been very '*structured*', whereas the community-based learning placement was '*chaotic*', albeit enjoyable, as it was a roll-on, roll-off programme where learners would arrive without warning. She described one particular experience where a

new learner had turned up and as her mentor was busy, Sarah introduced her to the centre. She said:

> *I just started talking to her and I was talking to her about maths and showing her through the little booklet. You think, oh, god. OK. I have a few activities I've just used multiple times as an introduction thing. I'm gradually getting a little stack of things I can throw at people.*

Pat felt the practical aspect of the programme had helped her to consider factors that impact on inclusion such as *'things like dyslexia'* or *'personal or other circumstances, financial circumstances that might be affecting that individual'*. Although she had considered inclusion in a theoretical sense prior to starting the course, she said *'I don't think I had anticipated or appreciated the practice that needs to go in to ensure the inclusion'*. The emphasis on supporting individual learners was also mentioned by Suzy who suggested it was important to get to know individual learners in order to respond to their needs. She attributes her knowledge and confidence in supporting autistic learners to the practical experience she had on her placement, stating that although '*the theory is there*' on the PGCE, being *'in the classes with the learners'* and *'just being in those situations'* have supported her development as a tutor. Positive about the experiences she has had on programme, Suzy remarked:

> *in terms of learners with specific learning difficulties I feel that I have learned a lot. And I've got still got a huge amount to learn, but I'm developing my skills and experience in how to help learners who have specific difficulties.*

Suzy commented that although she had *'a number of different types'* of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities in her class she was not *'a specialist'*, stating *'I haven't done a specialist course in supporting learners with autism'*. Suzy showed an interest into behaviour from a learner who liked to keep his umbrella next to him whilst in class and when Suzy suggested to him '*if you'd like to leave your umbrella there, it will be fine'* he declined, preferring to keep the item next to him. Suzy did not feel the need to challenge this behaviour, but asked the questions '*Why does he do that? What is that about?*'. She did not try to change this behaviour but tried to understand the reason for it. Reflecting on her teaching practice Suzy stated '*the most that I've learned, I would say is just from being in the classes with the learners*'. Practical teaching experience was clearly a positive aspect of the programme for Suzy. Indeed, in relation to learning from experience, she stated *'there's no substitute for that, is there?*'. Concurring with Suzy,

Paul also attributed understanding of autism to teaching experience but asserted he still had a lot learn.

Learning from the experience of teaching an autistic learner in her class was something that Michelle commented on. Following an incident where the learner left the room for forty-five minutes, Michelle had reflected on her management of a group task which had impacted on the learner and stated she had gained *'knowledge to think about when I'm planning my lessons in the future'*. Likewise, Sophie had learned from practical experiences and reflection on supporting learners. In relation to one learner on the autism spectrum who had difficulty in meeting project deadlines she recalled *'as I gain experience with them, I found ways of dealing with that behaviour and kind of encouraging them through it'*.

Isla explained how working with learners on the autism spectrum supported the development of her knowledge of autism. She said:

> *I learned a lot more because there was some students in my classroom who do have a diagnosis of ASD but don't present in maybe the sort of typical way, using air quotes there, and that again, showed me a different level of it.*

Similarly, Robert commented *'it's a constant learning curve. I would have two students in the same classroom with autism but very different people'*. Robert also considered teaching practice had helped him to develop a *'team work ethic'* and suggested *'it's helped me really to kind of read people'*.

Melanie also explained how her teaching practice had supported her development, stating *'because I had my work placement predominantly within autism, I felt like I did gain a lot of knowledge'*. Although she felt she learned a lot from her teaching placement and that it helped to develop her knowledge of autism, she did comment on the different experiences of her peers on the programme and the variation of placements which meant some student teachers did not have these experiences to learn from. Sophie also considered her experiences on teaching placement had supported her knowledge and confidence in teaching learners on the autism spectrum and although she recognised it '*would be difficult to facilitate'*, considered *'an opportunity to work with autistic learners'* whilst doing the PGCE would be beneficial. Diane, completing her teaching practice in an autism specific college, felt very strongly that teaching experience in an autism specific provision should be part of initial teacher education programmes asserting, *'everybody should work for like a month in a specialised autistic school'*.

### 4.1.4 Relationships

Learning from, and working with others, whilst doing their teaching qualification was a key benefit highlighted by the participants. Mentors, learning support assistants and colleagues were discussed as important influences on learning but there were some tensions with relationships highlighted and this will be explored next.

Mentors in placement were considered to be very important to the development of the student teachers. *Pat suggested 'the mentor will be the first port of call for practice-based support'* and Michelle commented on how *'helpful'* her mentors have been *'in terms of just getting guidance on dealing with low level learners'*. Sarah also suggested if she needed advice, she *'would go to my mentor'*. It is apparent from these extracts that support from mentors is highly valued, however, not everyone had such positive views of this collaboration. Suzy commented on reservations about asking for support, stating *'I think sometimes there's so much, so many pressures on people's time'*. Time was a factor that was considered as a restriction to learning from the mentor in the placement, but another concern was the attitude of some mentors. In the interview with Sophie, she discussed how she had concerns about an autistic learner's engagement in the session and went to her mentor for advice. The response she got was not what she expected:

> *when I've talked to my mentor about this, he would just say, oh, just let him get on with it. Yeah. Yeah, but I mean, personally, I couldn't, I couldn't just ignore it. My mentor, because my mentor knows this student, they know how they work, how they communicate. But, you know, if my mentor's attitude was to just let them get on with it, then obviously that isn't a particularly empathetic attitude. So, then I can't see how my mentor would thus offer guidance.*

When considering teaching placements Pat commented *'I would hope to receive support and guidance around differentiation and a briefing on what currently happens and to have learner profiles shared'*. However, in Sophie's experience this happened a little too late:

> *I was given a heads up by my placement mentor that students either had autism or Asperger's or ADD. But again, that was sort of after I had already interacted with these students and experienced their behaviour.*

Just as accounts of working with mentors were varied, experiences of working with learning support assistants (LSAs) were mixed. Michelle praised the expertise of the LSAs that she works closely with stating they '*give us some good advice'*. She talked about an instance where she was planning an educational visit and worked with an LSA to write the risk assessment and ensure the venue was accessible for the learner. Isla also had very positive experiences of collaborating with learning support whilst on placement, commenting:

> *one of my students has ASD and ADHD. Their learning support has been really good because they work really well with that student, and they've always been there to tell me when a strategy has gone really well.*

Isla praised the work of the LSA when faced with unexpected and unwanted sexualised comments from a learner, stating '*his LSA was quite good about explaining why that was inappropriate'*. The benefits of the relationship between a learner, the LSA and the teacher was commented on by Isla:

> *they are with the students that whole school day, if it's a one-to-one support, they have that different kind of relationship with them where it might be slightly easier for them to, you know, sort of bring them back down to a level where they can get back to class and kind of focus on things, than a teacher that they don't see as often, as frequently. And it's also important because, you know, the LSA would be there during break times and during lunch time. So, anything that happens outside of the class that might impact on what was happening in the class, they could mitigate any or reduce any possible negative things that might happen because they'd seen it and witnessed it. I think that's important.*

However, some tensions were noticed by Isla:

> *The issue, though, with ours is that in one of my classes pretty much all of my students have one to one LSAs but in my other class they don't, though we do have group support for about four or five students and that can be quite challenging because you know, we can't always ensure that they're getting the level of support that they might need because, you know, they're sort of stretched so thin.*

In contrast, the sometimes over reliance on LSAs was commented on by Michelle. In order to support a learner's transition to university or work the college had decided to reduce his support:

*it was just kind of trying to get him to use the equipment that he had more rather than relying fully on the support staff and giving him a bit more independence because obviously, when he leaves college, he'll have to learn to adapt to that.*

Robert although commenting that during his initial teacher education he *'learned to utilise the learning support staff'*, did come across issues with a lack of professionalism from one LSA in his classroom. He recalled:

*I've got like 30 students or fifteen students whatever it was, you know and to me, the learning support is to try and help to manage or to deal with that individual, you know, to focus on the individual so I can work with the rest of the group. And I felt in that context, I had an ineffective, ineffectual support assistant, which frustrated me because I'd done that job and I was like, I know how you should be doing this job, you know, but she seemed to spend most of her time in the classroom on her phone and used to just let the guy wander around the class and pick up things that, you know, like when in an engineering classroom and there was some precision engineering tools. And she would let him pick things up and he'd bray it off the bench and I was the one I had to go to say, look, can you stop? You know, I had to stop the class, go to him, say, look, you know, that's not our stuff it belongs to the engineering department. We can't afford to replace that.*

Although not all of his experiences with LSAs were negative ones and he advised *'if you've got support in the classroom, use your support. They could be your best friend'*.

Although positive about the philosophy of inclusion, Paul expressed concern at the lack of collaboration between staff in order to meet individual needs. He recounted a time over the current academic year where learners who were entitled to a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) had not received this due to lack of availability. Trying to include all learners and giving extra attention to the learners that needed support but did not have an LSA, led him to question his practice. He wondered whether by making these adjustments he could be inadvertently discriminating against a particular learner and was concerned that this could be viewed as *'picking on'* the learner. He felt a support worker in sessions would be really beneficial. Paul was concerned that including autistic learners in the classroom without the support from an LSA may cause disruption and could *'over-load'* tutors. He states *'I can't focus on one learner. You know, I've got 24 other learners to deal with'*.

Similar to Paul, Suzy also felt that one of her learners would benefit from learning support as she felt the demands on her time were being stretched:

> *I've never taught somebody who had that level of difficulty with organisation. I did have to have a chat with my manager, but I just said, you know, I think this person actually needs a support worker, really. You know, should have some kind of, because what I'm doing as a tutor is providing quite a bit of support and I'm spending, I was sessional, so I had to check with my manager. I'm actually putting time in on my time sheet and I said it's not actually a complete reflection of the time that I'm spending. I'm actually putting time in that's specifically meeting with this learner for an hour to do X, Y and Z, which isn't really what I feel my role is as a tutor but I'm doing it because he needs that assistance to get through the course. So, he did get through the course, but we had to extend the deadline. It was really tricky.*

Both Paul and Suzy talked about LSA support not being available although this was felt to be needed by both. As a result of her care and sense of responsibility to the learner, Suzy put in extra hours, above and beyond her contracted time in order to make sure this learner was not disadvantaged. Participants, like Suzy, who were already in-service alongside studying for their teaching qualification raised some tensions surrounding sharing of information and collaborative practice within the work environment. Although high praise was given to support staff, Paul found it frustrating that the needs of learners are not shared with the teaching staff as this limits his ability to be inclusive in his practice. Paul had concerns that this impacted on the quality of the education the learners received as adjustments that could be made were not distributed amongst the staff team. He shared:

> *One thing I do find it quite annoying with this college is…they're very reluctant to give out information regarding special needs. If you're working with a learning mentor, the learning mentors know all about it, but it's not disseminated to the staff on quite a lot of occasions.*

He then went on to discuss how this lack of communication led to learners not receiving the support they were entitled to:

> *there's two students who actually should have support members of staff in the classroom. I didn't know about it. The programme leader only found out about it after about three months because it wasn't passed*

*down and eventually, we'd try to get in touch and they said basically we haven't got any staff to do it, so we cannot cover it.*

Similarly, Robert had experienced teaching a class without any information on the learners. He recalled suspecting a young person was on the autism spectrum after seeing his handwriting but was surprised that *'nobody flagged it, you know, none of his subject tutors'*. This demonstrates the lack of communication between staff members of important information that could have helped Robert to prepare for the learner's needs. At times during the programme, Robert had questioned his ability to do the job stating *'I would feel like I was failing even when I wasn't'*, but rather than keep this to himself he recalled how he approached colleagues and his line-manager to ask how he could improve. Recognising the need for support, Robert said '*I don't necessarily know, you know, what I'm doing. I'm still learning to teach'*.

Like Robert, others have had positive experiences and found solace in their colleagues. Diane, for example, sought advice from an experienced colleague when experiencing difficulties with her relationship with a learner. Michelle also commented on the support from colleagues, stating '*I'm able to kind of approach them and they're pretty good'*. She reflected on the advantages of already being in a paid teaching role whilst doing the PGCE and contrasted her support network with a student teacher on placement, stating:

*I think for those just coming in or going in to their work one day a week they're probably not going to have access to all that, whether that be with learning support or other members of staff when they're in so they might struggle in that sense. I mean, first thing, as soon as we go in on a morning, like, we'll have a chat. We'll talk about previous days. We'll talk about certain students. We've got quite small teams that we're in on different levels of courses. We all know each other's kind of plans and, well, everything. So, we're constantly talking all the time. So, it would be massive, massive struggle, I suppose, with just going in one day and not having that interaction quite regularly on a daily basis.*

This extract highlights the very different experiences that each individual student teacher will have on the programme. Teaching in a range of contexts, some pre-service, some in-service, all with different characters and relationships, mean that each person's journey on the programme will be unique.

### 4.1.5 PGCE lessons

The final part of this section will discuss findings in relation to the content of taught PGCE lessons. It shows the difference of opinions on what the participants felt they learnt about including autistic learners and what they felt about the focus on autism within the PGCE programme. In summary, those who were studying the LDD pathway were satisfied with the attention given to including autistic learners, whilst those on other pathways varied in their opinions on this. These differences in viewpoints will be elucidated below.

Most participants were positive about their experiences on the PGCE. Comments included Suzy stating, '*the course has been brilliant'* and Paul expressing *'the PGCE has made a big difference. It's definitely helped on the inclusion side'*. How the PGCE prepared student teachers for the inclusion of autistic learners reflected the different pathways the participants were taking. For example, those who were doing the LDD specialists' route – Melanie, Isla, Robert and Diane – were confident that the programme had prepared them to support autistic learners. Melanie commented that '*inclusion was embedded within each lesson'* and that she was supported to write lesson plans and create or adapt resources to support learners '*to succeed'*. Isla said, *'I think I've definitely built on what I already know'* and Diane commented *'I had to learn more, read more books about it'*. Robert suggested the course provided *'building blocks'* and felt he had been directed to specialist reading around autism as well as having practical teaching experience in this area.

Those participants on other pathways were mixed in their opinions with some expressing the topic of autism was important to include but should be covered earlier in the programme, whilst others questioned why autism should be given priority over any other disability. For example, Sophie thought:

> *the course content, the teacher training, it was more about kind of social awareness, equality for people of a different cultural or economic background. There were some sessions dedicated to talking about autism and thinking about what autism is and how autism can affect people in social situations and in educational settings. That was it really, I felt like it was kind of on a surface level and it was also quite late in the course. Aside from that, I had sort of gained understanding of probably how to manage behaviour of autistic people, more so than gaining understanding about autism itself. I think the sessions that we did have during the PGCE, the same information in the same format. I just think*

> *at an earlier stage in the course, because by that point, I think it was in stage two. So, I had already completed some months of my placement. So even though the information was interesting to learn about, I didn't really feel that it then helped me in in my teaching practice because I had already found my own ways of addressing any issues that I came across.*

This contrasted with the experiences of other participants, for example, Sarah and Pat who discussed how they had not received any input on the inclusion of autistic learners specifically, although inclusive practice was embedded throughout the programme. Sarah said:

> *I mean, there's been lots of stuff on inclusion which I totally agree with. I think that's absolutely the way forward. Specifically on autistic learners, not so much, but then I'm doing the math specialism rather than LDD, it was more general inclusion advice than specific to autistic learners.*

Pat expressed that although the inclusion of people with disabilities had been discussed in PGCE sessions a specific focus on autism was not included. She suggested a focus on '*neuro sensitivity*' was an '*aspect that we could think about strengthening*'. Similarly, Paul felt that he had not learned a great deal about autism and felt it had not been covered but he did not think this was vital to the PGCE programme. He felt the inclusion of this topic was an addition to the programme and asked if autism was included '*where do you stop though*?' Although he considered it would be interesting to understand more about autism, he suggested a '*full module on it or full session on it unless you're doing the SEN course*' would not be required. However, he thought a session early in the programme to raise awareness of autism would be useful for all student teachers. He did think that observing a specialist autism tutor and reporting on this experience would be beneficial for student teachers but that teaching a specialist autism class would not be necessary for those not doing the learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) route. Robert considered what could enhance the initial education programmes would be to include autistic guest speakers such as himself. He suggested student teachers could:

> *talk to me about what it's like to be somebody with autism. Talk to a real-life case study if you want to.*

Michelle felt that although she did not receive any specific guidance about how to include autistic learners this had not disadvantaged her teaching practice in any way. She did not

feel that autism needed to have more of a focus on the PGCE programme and felt that if she needed specialist advice, she would be confident to seek that out from tutors, colleagues or peers as necessary. Indeed, she expressed how beneficial it had been to share experiences with her peers who had taught in specialist provisions and how this influenced strategies she could try within her own teaching context. Reflecting on practice with peers was also highlighted as beneficial by Robert, who commented:

> *hearing other people's experiences from people who either work in a mainstream setting and had students on the autistic spectrum or people who work in a specialist college for people with autism and hearing about their experiences and hearing that you know how they perhaps dealt with things or perhaps how they planned and structured things, I'm kind of going oh, I like that. That works well. I can borrow that.*

Mirroring Paul's viewpoint, Michelle did not think a specialist module would be beneficial and questioned whether because she had a student with muscular dystrophy this year that should have been included in the PGCE sessions. She commented '*the list could go on*'.

Sarah also questioned whether the inclusion of autistic learners should be prioritised, stating:

> *Do we need like a whole specialist section on autism? Probably not, unless I was going to specialise in that. I think just including it as part of a general, how do you make it inclusive for everyone? That's probably fine because there are so many different things to include for making learning inclusive. But if I was going to do that, go and work in a school that specialises with autistic learners, then I would want more. But then I'd probably do an LDD route, I guess.*

Sarah confidently discussed a range of disability and accessibility issues but felt that she did not have practical experience of working with autistic learners whilst on the PGCE commenting *'I've not really been exposed to that in a teaching setting'*. Sarah's knowledge of a wide range of disability issues came from her previous experience of working in the health sector and her position on the disability committee within her organisation but commented that her understanding of inclusion 'definitely developed during the PGCE'. She highlighted that although there has '*been lots of stuff on inclusion*' on the PGCE, this did not concentrate specifically on the inclusion of autistic learners but felt this was not needed as she did not have any autistic learners in her class.

Suzy considered that although the theory around inclusion is fine, perhaps more use of scenarios and case studies in class would support an understanding of autism for those student teachers who did not experience teaching an autistic learner whilst on programme. She felt this could support those not doing the LDD specialist route to understand how people might learn differently and how this might be managed.

These findings demonstrate the diverse range of experiences participants had in taught PGCE lessons and the varied views the participants hold about the content of the programme in relation to the inclusion of autistic learners. The next section will explore in more detail, perceptions of autism and both personal and professional experiences as described by the participants.

### 4.2 Perceptions and experience of autistic learners

This section will discuss the findings related to perceptions and experiences of autism. To start this section and to provide an overview of participants' knowledge and understanding of autism, participants' opinions on the use of language in relation to autism and disability will be presented. The sub- headings 'behaviour', 'communication' and 'sensory' will then be used successively to organise and present the contributions of the participants based on visibility of these themes in participants' interviews.

Overall, findings demonstrate mixed experiences and perceptions of autistic learners and these are based on participants' actual experiences, anecdotal conversations they have had with friends and family, and programmes they have seen on television. Media influences were both perceived as positive and negative with one participant suggesting television programmes had added to his perception of autistic people being segregated from society whilst another participant suggested autistic stereotypes were being dismantled through representation in dramas.

Most participants had concerns over behaviour that challenges or is disruptive. Actual behavioural incidents are reported and the emotional impact on the student teachers when managing behaviour is presented, as described by the participants. Awareness of difficulties with communication and the importance of adapting communication was a significant finding showing responsiveness and willingness to adapt to meet the different needs of learners in a variety of contexts. Sensory differences were mentioned by less than half of the participants, however, the personal experiences of incidents related to sensory regulation are powerful stories to share and stress the importance of teachers'

knowledge and understanding in this area. Considering atypical sensory responses are prevalent in over 90% of children and adults on the autism spectrum (Tavassoli, Miller, Schoen, Jo Brout, Sullivan & Baron-Cohen, 2018), the very fact that this topic is omitted from most participants' accounts could be an indicator of the lack of awareness of this matter.

### 4.2.1 Diagnosis and disability and language

There were varying degrees of understanding of autism and this reflected the experiences student teachers had with individuals on the autism spectrum. When asked what comes to mind when hearing the word autism all the participants except for two used the word *'spectrum',* the other two used the words *'umbrella term'* or *'range'* showing understanding that autism is varied and affects individuals differently. Most participants were positive in their descriptions and used words such as *'condition', 'diverse'* and '*individual'* to express their ideas of autism. Some participants could talk very confidently about autism from their own experiences of supporting family, for example Isla and Melanie who have siblings on the spectrum. One participant, Robert, discussed his knowledge of autism from an insider's perspective, having a diagnosis of autism himself. Paul was less confident in his knowledge of autism stating, '*I've heard there's an autism spectrum'* but *'I don't know a lot about autism*'. The others had varying knowledge and experience between these two poles, and this will be elucidated throughout the discussion.

Overwhelmingly, the use of language to describe people on the autism spectrum was positive. The notion of changing language and labels impacting on inclusion was alluded to during some of the interviews. Melanie, for example, highlighted shifting terminology when considering if she should use the words autism or Asperger syndrome and commented '*Now it's this neurodiversity isn't it?'* Some participants struggled to find the right words and questioned their use, for example when talking about autism Michelle said *'I don't know whether disability is the right word or difficulty's the right word',* Sophie stated, *'I don't want to say symptoms because that makes it seem, you know, almost debilitating in a way',* and Suzy was hesitant in using the words ' special schools' querying *'I don't think they are called special schools now'*. This tentativeness around language could be related to fear of using an offensive term and these remarks highlight the important issue of ensuring a safe space on initial teacher education programmes to

discuss the matter. This was something Pat commented on when considering supporting new teachers with regards to the inclusion of autistic learners. She said:

> *I think it's about us all championing inclusion and diversity and being able to name what that looked like, to talk about what that might look like in a classroom. So, I think that at my stage of development, it will be about encouraging the open mindedness and preparedness and willingness to be that welcoming teacher.*

Those who have experienced inclusive practice in this respect demonstrated confidence in their own ability to plan for inclusive practice whilst those who have not been exposed to this diversity were less confident. Robert, who has a diagnosis of autism and children on the autism spectrum, also emphasised how *'everybody is different …. it is a spectrum, different needs, different abilities, but each person, each individual should be valued'*. Melanie asserted '*each autistic person, is completely different…I see them as just people'* and this mirrored Sarah's statement of '*they're just people'*. Showing awareness of the importance of language in her account, Sarah commented on the categorisation of autism as a disability, proclaiming:

> *It's not a disability as such. It's only a disability because of the way that the rest of us teach and learn. It's just, it's not really a disability, it's just a difference. I like that term.*

Personal experiences were not specifically asked about in the interviews, but the majority of the participants did discuss how their own encounters with autistic people had influenced their views. Those with close relatives or friends with a diagnosis of autism, for example Pat, Melanie and Isla, held strong opinions about the way autistic people are viewed and treated both within school and the wider society.

Paul and Michelle both mentioned how they had talked to family members, wife and mother respectively, who had taught autistic learners and who influenced their understanding of autism. Michelle felt supported by conversations with her mother to manage the disruptive behaviour a young person was presenting. This supported a positive response from the learner who responded to the extra responsibility he was given as a result of the discussion, leading to a positive perception of this learner by Michelle. In Paul's case his wife's stories seemed to influence his perceptions in a more negative manner, he said *'they would love to run around, and they would love to strip off and everything and just go to the toilet in the corner'*. Whilst this may be a truth of a particular learner, such comments can form perceptions of people on the autism spectrum

and lead to generalisations. Commenting on such assumptions, Robert highlighted the frustrating generalisations he has heard regarding autism:

> *I've heard people that say, "they're all the same" or "people with autism don't talk to people". What am I doing with you now? "People with autism can't travel independently". How do you think I got myself to work this morning? "People with autism don't like crowds or don't like going to crowded places. I'll go to the cinema; I'll go to the theatre. I'll go to a restaurant. "People with autism are funny about the food". No, I'll eat everything from frogs' legs to kangaroo.*

Robert suggested that the media were currently having a positive impact on people's understanding of autism, highlighting the television series '*The A Word*' as '*breaking down some of the stereotypes*'. However, this might depend on what programmes people watch as Paul stated that he does not know a lot about autism and that his knowledge has mainly come from TV and film. He said the first thoughts that used to come to mind before he started teaching when hearing the word autism was of:

> *the type of autism that you see on TV. You know, where they are very, very autistic, they're in one to one isolation wards and they cannot really speak.*

No single media representation of autism can be accurate in portraying the heterogeneity of the autistic population. Talking of his own experiences as an autistic man in the workplace, Robert described his involvement of delivering autism training to his colleagues. Suggesting their knowledge of autism may have come from the media he said:

> *A lot of it seems to be from what people have seen in the media, in films, television programmes. You know, perhaps people who aren't quite capable to manage in society without somebody supporting them and they seem quite shocked that I, as a person with autism, had been in a relationship, had been married and had children. It seemed outside their comprehension that somebody with autism was capable of forming a meaningful relationship and having children.*

Robert commented that although historically people on the autism spectrum were kept in long-stay hospitals '*so they don't frighten the children … things are moving on now from that*'. Robert highlights how progress has been made with the move to a more inclusive society, however inequities in accessing education were discussed by some participants. One of the most striking observations was the passion that participants spoke with when

recounting perceived injustices inflicted on those they care for. Their discourse littered with language more akin to war. For example, when recalling her younger brother's struggle to acquire support in school, Isla stated:

> *we have to fight to get this for him. It was the same even when he was younger, like, you know, fight to get the diagnosis, fight to get an EHCP plan in place, or there's this or there's that.*

Pat also recounted the *'big battle'* that her friend had to ensure appropriate support for their son to enable him to access education, saying they '*had to battle and battle and battle'* against the council. Although they won this case, the fight continues as they now require support to move into adult services. Pat was concerned that those making decisions about the lives of autistic people did not consider the needs and wishes of the young person and their family and that this process very much *'depersonalised'* the young person. Pat also highlighted the impact on families when support is not available and parents are consumed with fighting for the rights of their children. Pat's friend had to give up her job which has both social and economic impacts on the family.

Pat attributes her understanding of autism to her lived experience stating:

> *if I hadn't lived through our friend's childhood, I probably wouldn't have seen it in all its complexity…. I realise just how much that experience has shaped my knowledge or understanding or preconceptions about things.*

### 4.2.2 Behaviour

Managing behaviour and the impact of behaviour on the learning environment was a concern raised by the participants. The following examples demonstrate some of the challenges the participants experienced in relation to unexpected behaviour whilst undertaking teaching practice.

Sophie, teaching a level 3 BTEC programme, commented on an autistic learner who appeared to be unaware of their conduct in the learning environment:

> *He was quite difficult to work with at times because he would become very emotional very quickly over relatively small things, but I suppose to him they weren't small things.*

The small things included the printer not working which, being unexpected, resulted in the learner being unable to cope with the situation and leaving the classroom in tears. Although allowing the learner to leave the classroom to self-regulate would be an appropriate form of support in this situation, Sophie expressed her difficulty with dealing with such behaviour from young adults preparing to move on to university. She was torn between supporting him and letting him '*solve this problem more independently*' as '*in higher education there's not necessarily going to be this level of support*'. The expectation that learners will not need or have support in higher education (HE) perhaps highlights the lack of awareness of the increasing numbers of learners on the autism spectrum moving into HE and their right to receive appropriate support (Gurbuz *et al.*, 2019).

Difficulty meeting deadlines and an unwillingness to communicate were also key factors of concern expressed by Sophie about this learner:

> *He would have a lot of probably inappropriate reasons why he couldn't complete work. Even to the point of saying, I can't go there and do this because I don't feel comfortable there, which just did cause problems because their grades ended up suffering as a result of that. Yeah, so their behaviour was quite challenging to manage at times. Just becoming emotional, easily overemotional, stressed out. To the point of, you know, becoming quite irrational, really, in their thought processes with withdrawn behaviour, anti-social behaviour, unwillingness to communicate openly with staff or the students. They likely weren't aware of kind of how they conducted themselves, because they didn't see anything wrong with how they spoke to me or how they acted out.*

The impact of behaviour on other learners was a concern Paul raised stating '*it's where they're starting to disrupt the class then I think we start to have an issue*'. He recalled the impulsivity of one learner who would constantly shout out the answers in class and although Paul was happy that he was '*so eager to please and learn*', this impacted on his ability to assess the progress of other learners during whole-class question and answer segments. In addition to the effect on other learners, the emotional impact on the student teachers of how to manage behaviour they perceived as difficult was demonstrated in Michelle's recollection of coaching a '*disruptive*' and '*hyperactive*' learner. She explained the difficulties of managing a large group when the behaviours displayed by this one learner would cause amusement with the rest of the group leading to disengagement and lack of focus on the learning. She recounted how '*the first few weeks*

*I was coming home, and I was ragging my hair out and I thought this child is absolutely running rings around me'*. However, she had taken into account his energy levels and used that to keep him engaged, for example, through giving him responsibility to set up equipment and to collect this back in. She considered this was an effective strategy to manage this learner but wished she had tried it sooner.

The above examples demonstrate the concerns student teachers have around managing disruptive behaviour and the added pressures they felt when including an autistic learner. However, disruptive behaviour was not the only behaviour experienced by the student teachers. Robert, Melanie and Diane all experienced what can be described as behaviour that challenges. This has been defined by Emerson (2001:3) as:

> *Culturally abnormal behaviour(s) of such an intensity, frequency or duration that the physical safety of the person or others is likely to be placed in serious jeopardy, or behaviour which is likely to seriously limit use of, or result in the person being denied access to, ordinary community facilities.*

Robert spoke of his past experiences supporting a learner who displayed behaviour that challenges:

> *He had these issues, you know, things like trying to punch through windows, you know, kick through doors, you know, things like that. But it became part of my normal as well. You know, it was like, like if you go in a shop and you're stacking shelves in the supermarket, that becomes part of your normal.*

Although faced with this behaviour, Robert recounted how such incidents arose when there was a communication breakdown. Robert spoke about the first time he was involved in a restraint, describing it as a *'shock to the system'*. The importance of team working and support from colleagues to deescalate behaviours or take it in turns to take breaks when dealing with an ongoing behavioural incident was something Robert found valuable in his experiences. Although Robert's experiences were prior to doing his teaching qualification, Melanie's experiences of behaviour that challenges were recent. Melanie gained employment in an autism specific school towards the end of her PGCE. At the time of the interview, she was on sick leave from work due to an injury from an incident with a learner. She explained:

> *I was on a minibus and I was in the front passenger seat and there was a driver and then if you can imagine, behind that, there's three passenger*

*seats and then behind that there's another three passenger seats. And so, there was a staff member in the middle row and then and two pupils in the back seat and nothing was happening. There was no triggers, no nothing. It was just so out the blue, like even when after this happened, we couldn't fathom out why. As you can imagine, he's like a six foot four 16-year-old who was built like a rugby player I'd say, and he took his seat belt off and he climbed over and he like obviously he is, too, like the size of him's too big for one staff member to help, if you know what I mean. So, he just grabbed my hand and just pulled me and he was ragging me all over on the front seat and we were on the A19 as well. And so, I had to take my seat belt off, try and get him off myself and then get in the footwell but he would still manage to get his hand down. But like there's just loads, loads that happens in the classroom as well. Like sometimes it can just happen so randomly, and you don't even expect it and you don't even know why. Or sometimes you do try all the sort of strategies and just the behaviours come out anyways, but it can be quite, yeah.*

The above example highlights the highly emotive contexts some student teachers are managing alongside their studies and teaching practice. Melanie was clearly concerned about the behaviours she manages within her place of work. However, she did not feel supported by her organisation to have the opportunity to debrief following an incident. She felt her own well-being was not considered and support not available for the well-being of the staff members. With reference to the management, she commented that after the incident which resulted in her absence from work '*you'd think they'd be a bit more supportive …. but they're not'*. This example also demonstrates that although behaviour interventions can be planned pro-actively sometimes an incident can occur without any warning. This can make working in this environment both emotionally and physically draining.

In order to manage behaviour that challenges, Diane reflected on some training she had undertaken prior to doing her PGCE which suggested:

*if somebody has like a behaviour, like extreme behaviour, you should join in in that behaviour because that makes like a bridge between you and that person and that person understand that you can speak, if you want to, their language.*

However, although this may support communication with the learner in certain circumstances, for example through developing intensive interaction as advocated for by Caldwell (2005) and Zeedyk, Caldwell & Davies (2009), if the behaviour is harmful this advice is unlikely to be useful. The behaviour that Diane was referring to was not harmful though; the point was made in relation to what might be termed special interests. Special interests, or what were previously referred to as the more negative 'obsessions', is linked to restrictive and repetitive behaviours (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019). Diane explained how the learner she worked with had a special interest in rubbish trucks and every week on the allotted day the learner would refuse to come into the classroom until he had seen the rubbish truck arriving and emptying the bins. She explained how she knew it was pointless to try to engage him in the lesson until this had happened and joked *'thank God they were quite punctual'*. This example from a specialist autism provision shows that an understanding of the learner's interests and routines can support a calm and respectful learning environment, however a mainstream provision might not be so accommodating. The lack of understanding of the condition could lead to negativity towards the learner as Isla explained. She said her brother had a reputation for being disruptive stating '*he used to always get called naughty*'. Isla found this labelling of her brother very frustrating. She insisted:

> *if you actually put proper things in place you probably wouldn't get those sorts of behaviour. You wouldn't have to exclude him. Actually listen to stuff.*

This rejection by the school could lead to the young person feeling bad about themselves. This could be compounded if the learner experiences rejection or bullying by peers and this was a concern for Paul. Although Paul felt it would be useful for staff, he had concerns over doing autism awareness sessions with the learners as he feared it has the potential to lead to the identification of traits in peers and might result in bullying. These apprehensions demonstrate that Paul thought his learners might see difference as a weakness. In his male-dominated, vocational teaching context where he has previously witnessed learners being teased by others, this was a worry. Contexts the student teachers were in placement varied and this might have some impact of conceptions and experiences of inclusion. This will be discussed in more detail in the 'inclusion' section of this chapter.

### 4.2.3 Communication

Most participants discussed the significance of communication with learners and gave examples of how they have adapted resources or strategies to support interaction and develop independence. Michelle described an autistic learner she worked with as '*shy and reserved*'. Isla also talked about a learner who was '*reserved*' and who '*didn't really want to talk, didn't want to interact*' and this contrasted with Suzy's experiences of a learner who '*would talk and talk and talk and talk and talk and talk*' and Robert's experiences of an autistic learner who:

> *seemed to want to try and dominate the conversation and dominate the classroom and dominate the other students in a way. It's like talking at people rather than talking with them and it was like his opinion, nobody else's opinion mattered.*

These examples demonstrate how different each individual learner is and the importance that a one size fits all, blanket approach is not taken when considering the inclusion of autistic learners. Ensuring learning goals are personalised and appropriate is arguably a key factor in supporting inclusion, however recognising the abstract nature of certain learner targets within her placement, Isla commented:

> *one of the students has a target of "recognise when you are offending others". Which obviously when you have a social communication disorder, can be quite difficult. So, I think that could have really been approached in a different way because they don't always know when they're offending someone. They don't know why it would be offensive or they don't know how to recognise offence in somebody else so I think that was quite a broad target which maybe could have been broken down a little bit more.*

Having a knowledge of autism grounded in her own experience of living with a younger sibling on the autism spectrum and her studying at master's level in this subject, Isla was critical of the supposed individual targets set for the learners whose condition has social and communication difficulties at its core. The difficulties around reading people and communicating appropriately with others was highlighted in another example by Isla. Whilst on placement Isla experienced sexual advances from a learner:

> *One of my students who does have ASD, they are prone to saying quite sexually charged comments or really inappropriate comments and that*

*has happened towards me where they have said really inappropriate stuff or tried to hold my hand or do that sort of thing. So, I guess it's a little bit of a concern, but it's more a level of uncomfortable and kind of where you stand with that sort of thing and how you shut it down. That was quite hard because he often viewed me as someone who was on the same level as him, like a friend rather than a teacher. That could be quite difficult.*

Developing appropriate interaction with this learner was a challenge for Isla and she worked with other staff members to teach respectful communication in a learning environment.

Also demonstrating insight into communication and language difficulties Diane commented on the need to '*learn their language'* and recalled an action learning project she had undertaken as part of her PGCE where she created puppets to support communication with an autistic learner:

*One day we were out shopping for supplies for our arts and crafts club and she* [the learner] *saw these two hand puppets. It was the first time I heard her talking by herself. She said 'Fluffy' and she touched this white rabbit. So, I thought that's a good idea, you know, using puppets with her. Especially because I saw her reaction. So, I bought them. They were just six pounds. I bought the puppets and straightaway we started to act using them and it went so well, I was impressed. She really went into it and she was talking to the puppet, using the puppet, and she had this wonderful American voice when she was saying it because what we were acting out, was actually what we did that day, but she wasn't herself anymore. She wasn't Kitty. She was the puppet. I said, "Oh, where did you go today?" And she's saying, "oh, I went to the town, I went shopping and I went out for a drink". It was absolutely fascinating how well she would speak when it wasn't her that was speaking, it was the puppet.*

Diane went on to say how these puppets are now pinned to the board and the learner uses them to communicate with others enabling her control over her interactions. Having responded to the learners' interests, Diane had been able to use puppets to develop communication and support interaction between herself and the learner. To facilitate inclusive practice, an acknowledgement of differing communication aids to support interaction, organisation and self-advocacy were highlighted by other participants. For

example, Robert mentioned '*picture boards*' to support daily routines with learners on the autistic spectrum. Commenting on the need for such aids to be personalised he said, '*you tailor your approach to the individual*'. Isla claimed to use a range of visual supports for her whole class and commented on the use of visual timers for a particular student to support task focus. These examples demonstrate how the participants were aware of communication difficulties and sought tools and strategies to facilitate learning and promote independence. Whilst these tools were supportive, other approaches may not be as successful. Melanie recounted a lesson she was teaching which was based around communication:

> *That was like kind of that whole like learning how to communicate and he just wasn't having any of it and he just said something inappropriate and he stormed off.*

Diane talked about an autistic learner she had worked with who was '*more or less forced by her mother to look in your eyes when she was talked to*', which can often be painful for individuals on the autism spectrum (Caldwell, 2005). This example demonstrates the desire to change autistic people to fit in with the rest of society. Diane explained that she may have found her own strategy to manage this demand:

> *she seemed like she was looking at you, but you could see that she was not looking into your eyes. She was gazing past you.*

Sophie also mentioned the '*little eye contact*' between herself and a learner which she felt was a barrier to communication. However, as Sophie was '*aware of the issues with communication*', she explained how she had built up their relationship over time in order that she could support the individual to learn. She did this by asking questions about his work and although at first she said she only got one word replies, the responses became more detailed '*as we became more familiar with each other*', thus demonstrating the importance of building relationships with learners.

Similarly, Michelle discussed the importance of not putting a learner 'in an uncomfortable situation' such as talking in front of the whole class in group discussions. She reflected on the time she had set up such an activity; the learner had removed himself from the classroom to go to the toilet and had not returned for forty-five minutes thus avoiding the situation and pressure to participate. Since that experience, Michelle adjusted her methods and found the learner could participate in small group discussions where she was able to assess his understanding and progress in a less demanding environment.

One of the difficulties an autistic person might have with communication is with figurative language (Happé, 1995). Four of the participants mentioned this. Pat, when talking about the autistic young man she knows in a personal capacity said:

> *I think that that we often associate autism with things being very literal for the young person and in my experience, that's been true. He does take things very, very literally. Doesn't have no concept that someone might not be telling the truth.*

Being vulnerable to dishonesty is one concern mentioned by Pat, but in the learning environment how instructions were given and received was also discussed by some participants. Suzy explained the need to *'triple check'* directions given to the learner in class as although *'he is perfectly capable of doing it',* she worried the literal interpretation of instructions could sometimes be misunderstood. Paul was also aware of possible literal interpretation and suggested putting a *'strategy in to cope with that'*. Such a strategy might include visual instructions but being aware of the phrases used in class was an important consideration for Sophie who was positive in suggesting how she might adapt her language to support communication stating:

> *I'm kind of aware of the issues with communication, with verbal communication that autistic people can have, where you know if somebody says something in jest or is metaphor, that it can be construed as being very straight and categoric statement by a person with autism. So being aware of the language that I use and how I conduct myself in conversation with them, I mean, that was something that I also learned to become aware of.*

These examples show that awareness of the possibility of literal interpretation and strategies to mitigate the chances of this happening were met with positive attitudes. However, not all issues were felt to be as easy to deal with. Suzy discussed the difficulties that one of her learners had with organisation of his file and how she struggled to not take over and do it for him. She explained how she tried to support this learner:

> *I brought him some file dividers and got him to sit and write the modules on the sides and I said, right so all of those, and I tried to, now what I found very hard actually was not doing it myself. When I was sitting there watching him do it, I found that really hard because I'm quite an organised person, so I just found it really, that was really tricky*

*because he obviously took way longer than I would have taken doing it for him. So that was quite a tricky thing.*

Suzy explained the contradiction she felt between wanting to do it for him to save time and understanding that to do that would be reducing his autonomy as a learner. In an environment where Suzy had explained staff are time poor as they are not allocated enough time to do the job, this tension could have resulted in Suzy doing the task for the learner but instead she chose to establish strategies to support the learner to develop his independence. Similarly, Diane recounted an example of how she had created a resource to support a learner's independence. The learner could not understand complex instructions and so instead of providing multiple verbal instructions, she broke each request down to one, for example, *'please bring the blue pot of paint'* before moving on to the next *instruction, 'now can you please bring the green one'*. Diane added that a visual timetable *'works really well'* for this learner, showing an understanding of the effectiveness of visuals to support communication.

Paul discussed a learner who, although requested to do so, did not take notes in class. Initially this had frustrated Paul, but he later found out that when the learner goes home in the evening, he revisits all the slides again *'and then takes notes at his own pace, which helps if it works for him'*. The reasons for the learner not taking notes in class were perhaps not analysed and could be related to difficulties with multi-channel processing, however, the learner had found their own strategy and Paul was happy that this was working.

These examples have shown how the student teachers have demonstrated positive attitudes to inclusion through the successful adaptation of their resources, delivery approaches or demands to accommodate different learners' communication methods and interaction skills.

### 4.2.4 Sensory

Many autistic people are vulnerable to sensory overload (Bogdashina, 2005). The majority of the research participants did not mention this but those with close personal experiences did, and these participants highlighted the importance of teachers understanding sensory differences in order to support individual learners to successfully participate in education. Pat, having had personal experiences with the autistic child of her friend, discussed how neuro sensitivity can affect '*interaction with the world*' and how noisy environments can '*be a nightmare for a child with neuro sensitivity*'. She

explained how the young man she knew could not cope with queuing and the noise such circumstances generated. Such situations could be incredibly distressing, and this was something Isla highlighted with regards to her brother:

> *on sports day I had to go in and act as support because it's a day that he couldn't handle, and he didn't qualify for support. I mean, it got to a point where he ran into a bush because everything was so overwhelming for him. I was sitting there and trying and trying to coax him out. I was like you can do this and all the teachers were sort of watching me, you know, and I was like fine you just stand there.*

Isla recalled the experiences she had escorting her younger brother home on the public bus. Sensitive to loud noises, her brother would attempt to kick other passengers for being loud stating *'if somebody is being loud, they're hurting me. So, I want to hurt them'*. Isla developed strategies such as sitting at the back of the bus and providing headphones for her brother to block out the noise. Other situations where sensory processing was an issue were public toilets with noisy hand-dryers and anywhere with crowds. These personal experiences have shaped the way Isla responds to other autistic individuals and have influenced her career choices as she specialised in sensory processing differences in her master's degree and subsequently studied the PGCE LDD route. However, she points out that her experiences with her brother are just one way her thoughts of autism have been developed, highlighting:

> *just because you've met one autistic person it doesn't mean that you have met them all. It doesn't mean that you know exactly what autism is and that we can always be learning about it.*

Isla expressed her annoyance of other people's misunderstandings and reactions to her brother's sensory needs and worried that *'it's people like that that kind of tend to slip through the cracks'*. She described her brother as being *'very good at maths'* but worried that his inability to imagine the future was impacting on his motivation to study and as he was cognitively very able would not get the support he needed to succeed in post-compulsory education.

Like Isla, Melanie also has a younger sibling, a sister who is autistic, and attributes her initial knowledge and interest in autism to the experiences with her sister. Melanie said, *'through having a younger sister who's autistic, you learn a lot about autism'*. This curiosity turned into a focus for her degree dissertation and her ambition to become a

teacher specialising in autism. Similar to Isla, Melanie thought of the person before the label commenting:

> *each autistic person is completely different…. I just see them as people…. I don't really see it as a deficit or anything like that. I just see it as that's them…. when I go into work I don't think of autism. I just think, oh, that's so-and-so.*

Melanie described her learners' sensory differences:

> *there's some kids that don't actually want anything. They just want a dark room, or they don't want nothing to feel, they don't want anything to touch them. They don't want the lights. They don't want the gym ball. When it comes to food, some of the foods have to be quite bland because they can't handle the strong-tasting foods. Whereas then you've got the other side where I've got one pupil, he likes to put his face up at the light, like actually like have his face up against the light. And he likes to like touch the bubbles and he's always bouncing on the gym ball and he likes playdough or anything you can play with in your hand.*

She attributes her understanding of sensory differences to both reading and her experiences of working in a specialist autism environment. For both Isla and Melanie, a key concern was how teachers did not understand the sensory perception differences of autistic learners. Diane shared this concern and drew on her experiences of supply work in schools stating learners on the autism spectrum had '*a lack of support'* as teachers '*didn't have an understanding of the autism'*. Diane explained how learners in her specialist autism college were provided with fidget gadgets, headphones and regular learning breaks to support self-regulation and she felt this was missing in the mainstream provisions she had worked in.

Self-regulation may be observed through stimming, or self-stimulating behaviour. This was mentioned by Melanie when she described a '*learner who is also preverbal, but he tends to rock a lot and do a lot of tapping, a lot of noises and a lot of verbalisations like "cluck cluck"'*.

Sarah also discussed a learner who needed to move around a lot in class and how she did not try to stop this behaviour:

> *if he was just jiggling around, I just left it because as long as he was listening and not chattering over me, I didn't care if he was dancing. If*

*you want to dance, crack on, because that's what he needed to do to listen.*

Both examples show a level of acceptance and understanding of the need for self-stimulating behaviour. However, masking such behaviours is common in autistic people (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019). Commenting on his own behaviour as an autistic adult, Robert said *'I don't show a lot of the behaviours of autism. Perhaps I'm good at masking and I've learned coping strategies'*.

These findings show the importance of understanding sensory and communication differences. The reflections of the participants' personal accounts highlight how some teachers did not understand autism and this had a negative impact on the individuals concerned. However, it also shows the student teachers interviewed for this study, although not always knowing the theory behind their actions, responded to the communication of learners through observation and interaction. The next and final section of this chapter will explore the findings in relation to inclusion.

### 4.3 Inclusion

This final section will present the findings in relation to inclusion. There were a few variations on what the term 'inclusion' meant to the participants; however, most agreed that it meant including *all* learners. The debate around segregated special schools and integrated educational settings has been a feature of the debate on inclusive practice for many years and although not specifically asked about during the interviews was commented on by a number of the participants. In general, participants were in agreement for the need to have both general and specialist educational provisions. However, concerns were raised about the lack of autism understanding in mainstream provisions. There was a general consensus amongst those participants on the LDD pathway that there was not enough autism content on general ITE programmes, and this was mentioned as a contributing factor to exclusion. The importance of developing relationships with learners was stressed by some of the participants as important to the role of a teacher.

### 4.3.1 Defining inclusion

In order to consider student teachers' perceptions around the inclusion of autistic learners, I asked

participants to explain what inclusion meant to them. Participants defined inclusion in a number of ways. Suzy struggled to articulate a definition, saying:

> *it's very difficult to say really exactly what that means, because I find that in any class of learners… it seems like a really obvious thing to say, each of them are individuals and each brings their own background and their own feelings about learning into the class.*

Paul also found the term inclusion difficult to define. In response to the question 'during the PGCE, have you developed an understanding of inclusion?' he stated:

> *It's a very difficult question to answer and I don't think there is a right or wrong answer.…but as long as you acknowledge, I think, that you have to include everybody, then you're on the right track.*

Melanie, too, responded to this question with the comment '*that's hard to explain'*. After consideration, this was followed by the statement:

> *I'd say inclusiveness means that whatever you're teaching, whatever the subject, whatever the lesson, it's adaptable for each learner and it meets their needs.*

This was similar to Diane's explanation, who said, '*inclusion means that in a group of people everybody is accepted and included in the group'* and to Michelle's description who said, '*to make sure everyone was included*'. For Pat, inclusion was '*about encouraging the open mindedness and preparedness and willingness to be that welcoming teacher'* and for Sophie, it meant '*facilitating everybody's ideas, giving everybody equal opportunity to express themselves and also promote tolerance'*. These findings demonstrate recognition of the teacher's personal responsibility to facilitate inclusive practice.

For Robert, who completed the learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) route, inclusion meant all learners being educated in the same space with varying support to enable access to learning:

*I mean, to me, inclusion is about having moved on from SEND being in a separate provision and being part of mainstream learning. Inclusion to me is where with the right level of support any learners can participate.*

Isla's viewpoint differed from Robert's. She described inclusion as:

*It doesn't mean that we necessarily all have to be in the same classroom if that's not going to work out properly. It's about giving everybody the same opportunity to the same level of education. It means making things equal. So that could mean differentiating for everybody. So, they could be doing the same content, but they could be doing widely different activity. And to me, that says inclusion, because then everybody's getting the same level of opportunity to do that content but just in very different ways.*

For Sarah, inclusion was related to equity of access to resources and using technology to support this. She spoke of inclusion as a wider concept *'than maybe one particular learning difference'* and commented on the importance of creating accessible learning material:

*there's just so many things that aren't inclusive, which could be, that don't need huge changes. Silly things like when you're making training videos, put subtitles on it. How hard is that?*

Although the participants mainly considered inclusion to be about education for all, examples of frustration with a system that can exclude learners on the autism spectrum from the mainstream were highlighted by some and these will be discussed next.

### 4.3.2 The debate about mainstream or specialist provision

The debate around what inclusion means and whether autistic learners should be educated in specialist or mainstream provisions alongside their peers was an issue some participants had strong and differing opinions about. Some participants felt they were not specifically qualified to support learners on the autism spectrum and felt it was important to have separate provisions whilst others considered this to be excluding learners. Ensuring teachers were equipped for inclusion with respect to autistic learners was highlighted by some participants as lacking in ITE programmes. The complexities of these matters are presented next.

Sarah, who did not undertake the learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) pathway, commented on ITE programmes being *'very different and people who want to specialise in that [LDD] and go into specialist schools, you know, they need that very specialist knowledge'*. Agreeing with the need for distinct provisions, but also highlighting how if teachers in mainstream provisions knew about autism more learners could stay in general education provisions alongside their peers, Melanie, who works in a specialist autism organisation asserted:

> *obviously, you do need specialist schools, but I think it would be better if mainstream schools, mainstream colleges and stuff became more known to it [autism] because then they don't have to leave school. They can stay there, and they can be happy … I'm going off my little sister's experience because she was in mainstream. She's not anymore, but when she was a mainstream school, she was in a classroom with 30. And, you know, even though the school knew she was autistic, they didn't know what to do, if you know what I mean. They didn't know what to do and how to help her to be in the mainstream school or a mainstream classroom. And even though these things were only little things and slight changes, they just didn't know how to do it.*

Similarly, Isla reflected on her brother's experiences of mainstream education. Isla recalled that her brother had been threatened with exclusion from a mainstream school a couple of times. She articulated her concerns and possible motives for this practice:

> *let's just exclude the person who needs help. It's obviously because they don't want to, you know, maybe deal with it. Or it looks bad on their figures or some other reason.*

Reflecting on the possibility of a move to a specialist autism provision for her brother, Isla highlighted the difficulties he faced:

> *he's always been around mainstream, whenever it comes to thinking about putting him in like a specialist place or we've taken him to ASD days or sensory days and he's just like, why am I here? I hate this, I'm not like them. We took him to an ASD cinema experience once when he was much younger and obviously, people are allowed to talk in them, you know and all that, and he got so wound up with everybody else. He just hated it.*

Isla's distress at her brother's experiences was perhaps exacerbated by seeing learners similar to her brother receiving the support in college that she felt her brother should receive in school. She revealed:

> *I think for me, on a personal basis, sometimes it could feel a little bit, I guess upsetting, because I could see how some of my students were getting the support that they needed and that they, of course, desired. But then I think about my brother and he doesn't get that because he is, you know, he can go to mainstream. He's just like, you know, a normal kid who sometimes acts out. That's kind of I guess the feeling that people have with him and I'm like, he kind of needs as much support as the students in my class.*

As the learners in Isla's placement were in a specialist provision within a general FE college, they were able to access support, but being in a mainstream school, her brother was not. The need for extra support for autistic learners was also mentioned by Suzy. Suzy felt that more support was given to learners within a specialist provision than in a general, mainstream context. Discussing a learner who had been educated in a specialist provision and had gone on to do a level 2 teaching assistant qualification with a placement in a specialist school, she commented:

> *the teachers there were able to give him the support that he needed or could recognise that in him what his needs were. But we all agreed that it would be difficult for him, not really possible probably for him, to be employed as a T.A. in a normal school, for want of a better word.*

This remark shows how learners can be supported to achieve qualifications provided they are given a supportive environment but the worry that these individuals will not gain employment exists.

Pat also spoke about making the choice between a mainstream *'state education'* and a specialist school for children with SEND. The inevitable questioning her friend had made about whether this was the right decision for her son was explained as she recalled, '*there is that question of are we doing the best that we can here? Is this the right context for that young person?*'. In Pat's case, her friend made the decision to send her son to a specialist school, but it was moving on from school and into further education that was becoming a worry. Pat commented:

> *I think the schooling has been brilliant up until now but post sixteen is what, you know, society struggles with. What do you do with that young person?*

Pat worried that opportunities for this young man would be closed as he '*struggles with literacy'* and is unlikely to gain a GCSE in English which is *'a gatekeeper subject'* and commented about the system:

> *the whole of the structures that we have don't have that flexibility to let people through that don't conform to the middle ground.*

Pat was concerned about how the education system and children's services would support this young person's transition into adulthood. She highlighted the need for '*a curriculum that could equip him for life and you know, get some sort of job'*.

Having done the LDD route, Isla commented on the other pathways her peers were studying and felt they did not receive enough content on including learners with a diverse range of needs and suggested a greater focus on this would prepare teachers more effectively for inclusive practice as *'even if they are a mainstream school, they probably will interact with students who have different needs'*. Robert also felt it is *'important to look at special education needs and learning difficulty and disability as part of teacher training'*. Melanie concurred with this viewpoint. She felt mainstream teachers did not receive enough training on autism, citing training which is '*only an hour'*, and that this should become part of the ITE curriculum for all teachers. She felt this knowledge would then filter through into staff teams and signs of autism might be picked up earlier, enabling supportive interventions to be put in place sooner. Melanie was also concerned about class sizes in mainstream schools and expressed that she thought planning for larger groups and working with many different classes reduced teachers' ability to effectively plan for all learners. She commented *'within mainstream, I feel like inclusiveness sort of goes down the pecking order'* and worried that as teachers did not spend a lot of time with the learners that learning difficulties or disabilities might not be recognised and the teachers might *'just see them as the naughty kids'*. Although she explained she thought it was important to educate student teachers preparing to work in mainstream schools and colleges about autism, she also considered a barrier to supporting inclusive practice once employed stating *'I don't think the teachers can cope; I think it's the workload'*. In concurrence with Melanie, Diane also explained that mainstream *'teachers have to be*

*trained to include'* autistic learners but also mentioned workload as a factor impacting on their ability to facilitate inclusion once qualified. She said:

> *if the teachers load was less heavy with paperwork, then they would have the time to have more autistic students in their class.*

In relation to preparing teachers for inclusive practice, Michelle commented:

> *I suppose in kind of, normal, apostrophes normal, schools or colleges or FE establishments that there is still the chance of having the odd student who have SEN, that you'll still have to deal with, that you'll still have to cope with.*

However, the reality of exclusion or removal from mainstream provision was highlighted by Melanie. Reflecting on her experiences of working in a specialist autism provision, she talked about learners who had previously been in, what is termed, 'mainstream education' but had to leave as they had been *'excluded or the parents have decided to take them out'*. She explained that some learners had not been in school for a year and commented *'obviously it has an effect on mental health then as well, like anxiety and depression, because they feel so secluded'*, stressing the possible long term social and emotional impact of exclusion.

The above discussion demonstrates the variety of personal and educational contexts the participants have experienced and how this might impact on their perceptions of inclusive practice. The next section will further explore the participants' observations of their own learning in relation to developing strategies and planning for differentiation to support the inclusion of autistic learners whilst studying for the teaching qualification.

### 4.3.3 Relationships with learners

Building relationships with learners and getting to know them as individuals was highlighted by some of the participants as important to the role of a teacher. Robert commented *'it takes time but once you have got those connections, then you can use that connection to develop the learners'*. Robert talked about how he would find out about a learner's interests to engage and motivate them in a learning activity. Robert commented on how regardless of context, the importance of relationships is key:

> *I've worked in lots of settings where I've had to deal with people and I think it is that building of that relationship with the people that you're dealing with, whatever scenario it is. I think trust, if you can get people to trust you, then they can open up to you.*

One of the situations Robert shared was when he was working with a learner who required three to one support for behaviour. Robert's anxiety about being in this unfamiliar situation caused him to be hesitant when interacting with the learner but he explained *'I had to get over that, you know, reluctance sometimes when I first started working with him'* and went on to explain how he developed a bond with the learner through sharing meals and playing ball games.

Sarah talked about how she had developed a relationship with a young person in her class through first observing him before initiating conversations. She explained that as he was hyperactive, on first meeting him she thought he was going to be disruptive. However, he became very interested in the topic of maths and surprised his parents when on parents evening, they received positive feedback and praise on his engagement in sessions and progress with learning. Sarah explained how the parents *'couldn't believe it'* as they were expecting a negative report on how *'he's a real troublemaker'*. Sarah's advice to new student teachers was to *'talk to your students. Just general chit chat and pay attention to what they're saying, how they're saying it, what they're doing'*. Developing a safe learning environment through making the learners feel comfortable was mentioned by Paul who highlighted the importance of being able to laugh with learners and the need to balance this with behavioural expectations to create a supportive and relaxed learning environment. Paul stated:

> *I quickly developed quite a good relationship with that group. They knew where I stood, I knew where they stood, we had a laugh with them, you know, we can have a laugh, have a bit of a joke and carry on. But at the same time, they knew they had to get the work done.*

As the above discussion shows, building relationships with learners was reflected upon by some participants, however the relationship between learners themselves was also a consideration for Sophie, who discussed how four of her neurodiverse learners would sit together in class and not socialise with others. The learners had diagnoses of dyslexia, autism, ADHD and Asperger's syndrome. She commented:

> *I guess they kind of maybe bonded over these different sort of challenges, because they could draw on each other's experiences and relate to one another and help each other out, so they got quite close.*

Sophie attributed her own developing relationships with the learners to showing interest in their work and their goals and aspirations and the fact that she *'would pretty consistently always emphasise that I am there to help them'*. However, she had previously been concerned that the learners did not like her and worried that she had done something to upset them, she explained:

> *I thought there was an issue with me and maybe I said something that offended them, or I had a tone in my voice that they took the wrong way.*

She later realised that this was their way of interacting and was not related to opinions on whether they liked her or not. Talking of the importance of developing relationships, Sophie stated the important things to remember are *'to have patience and to not take things personally and to be open to co-operation. It's a two-way street'*, emphasising the importance of reciprocal relationships between teachers and learners which is a key tenet of the ethics of care.

This chapter has highlighted the very varied experiences of the participants whilst studying their initial teacher education programme and demonstrates how individual personal and professional experiences influence perceptions and attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic learners. I will return to my initial research questions in the following chapter.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

## 5.1 Introduction

Given the lack of academic research focusing specifically on the implementation of inclusive practice in the post-compulsory sector (Meir, 2018) and the even smaller body of literature on student teachers' knowledge about inclusion with respect to autistic students in the post-compulsory sector, this study attempted to address an important area in the literature. In this chapter, I will discuss my interview data with respect to the ethics of care to examine student teachers' understanding of, perceptions towards, and experiences of the inclusion of autistic learners. In addition, I will analyse how the PGCE programme prepares student teachers to support autistic learners and consider how a further embedding of care ethics within the programme through modelling caring behaviours might support the holistic development of student teachers.

The data presented in the previous chapter suggests that student teachers' experiences prior to starting their ITE programme are a key influence in their perceptions and attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic learners. Whilst on the programme, student teachers reported various experiences of teaching autistic learners from no experience at all to placements in autism specific provisions. Opinions on how well the PGCE programme prepares student teachers to support autistic learners were mixed. Those doing the learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) pathway felt they were prepared and had the theoretical knowledge and practical experience to include autistic learners. Those student teachers who took other pathways, that is the Young People and Adults, English Literacy and ESOL and Maths and Numeracy, reported differing degrees of preparedness, both in terms of theory and practice. Whether the inclusion of autistic learners should be considered as a separate topic was the most striking in terms of differing viewpoints. Student teachers doing the LDD pathway felt strongly that autism should be included on ITE programmes to support understanding of needs and reduce exclusion. However, it was felt by the majority of participants on other pathways that autism, although interesting to consider, and important to explore on LDD specialist pathways, should not be given more of a focus than any other disability.

I will return to my initial research questions to frame this chapter. They were:

1) What are the student teachers' understandings of inclusion and autism?

2) What are the student teachers' attitudes towards including autistic learners?

3) What do student teachers consider as factors impacting on the inclusion of autistic learners?

4) What are the student teachers' opinions on how well the PGCE prepares them to support autistic learners?

I will consider how my findings answer these questions and reflect on the extent to which they align with the wider literature, set out in chapter two, of what has already been established in this field.

As discussed in chapter three, the ethics of care will be used as a theoretical framework. A brief summary of this theory will be presented in 5.1 at the start of this chapter. I will then answer my research questions in sections 5.2-5.5. Finally, in sections 5.6–5.8, I will discuss other relevant findings that arose from the data in relation to participants' experiences on the PGCE programme under the following themes:

a) The requirement to address care towards autistic learners through developing knowledge and cultivating attitudes
b) How care towards student teachers is essential – and how this can be demonstrated
c) The role of ITE programmes in creating inclusive teachers

## 5.1 Ethics of care

In chapter 3, I explained how ethics of care underpinned my practice as a researcher in attending to the needs of those for whom we take responsibility for (Held, 2005). Research is a social practice involving relations and responsiveness to others. Similarly, teachers have a responsibility to recognise and meet the needs of the learners in their care. The will to understand others' perspectives is central to ethics of care and therefore ethics of care was also the framework supporting my interpretative discussion in this chapter. Based on relationships and reciprocity, the ethics of care aligns with inclusive teaching as both are concerned with diligence, trust, and acceptance (Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Noddings (1992) highlights the challenge to care in schools, however responding to the needs of others (Gilligan, 2003) is a key factor of inclusive practice. As inclusion is a 'never ending process' (Ainscow, 1999:128), it is paramount that individual needs are acknowledged and addressed in order that those from marginalised groups have access to education, resources, and opportunities.

Ethics of Care is a concept concerned with 'conditions of vulnerability and inequality' (Tronto, 1993:134). Care is an alternative to a neo-liberal paradigm which suggest individuals are personally accountable for the situations in which they find themselves, especially in relation to inequality and exclusion (Zembylas, Bozalek & Shefer, 2014). Noddings, a leading figure in care in education, suggests 'an ethic of caring has its source in natural human caring, and it seeks the maintenance and enhancement of that caring' (Noddings, 1986:108). Essentially relational, Noddings (2002:20) asserts the 'connections between carer and cared-for' are paramount to providing and receiving care and although this practice starts in the home, these principles then have potential to impact wider society through the infiltration of policymaking. Tronto (1993) takes this concept further through the development of a political ethics of care which sees care as a disposition as well as a practice and discusses how minority groups are oppressed by those in power. Often considered a private pursuit, Tronto (1993:155) asserts 'an ethics of care remains incomplete without a political theory of care' and emphasises that to consider ethics of care in real situations it is important to see care not just as a private act but also as a political idea (Tronto, 1993:161) as 'care is always infused with power' and that makes it 'deeply political' (Tronto, 2015:9).

Tronto (1993:103) suggests

> that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.

This definition includes care for objects and care for the environment which is a shift away from the dyadic assumption of care between two people. This definition supports the ability to see care as important in a social and political life.

As a philosophy, the idea of care is inherently good. However, the relational approaches to identity stressed through an ethics of care account normalise interdependency and vulnerability and this can sometimes be seen as at odds with the narrative of individual independence, agency and self-representation (Davy, 2019). Indeed, care has been represented by the Disabled People's Movement as a 'barrier to the emancipation and independence of disabled people' (Huges, McKie, Hopkins & Watson, 2005:260) as it places disability in a state of passivity and dependency. This view sees care as having the potential to harm the recipient through the removal of personal autonomy. However, Davy (2019:102) asserts 'the agency and autonomy of individual persons can only emerge

relationally, through the support and enablement of others'. Indeed, Fineman (cited in Davy, 2019:103) highlights this autonomy as a 'myth' and suggests this is a result of the prevailing idea in contemporary Western society that the goal is to become self-sufficient. In reality, independence is an illusion. We are all dependent on others at different times of our lives and with fluctuating intensity. For example, we require care through infancy and childhood, or care when we are ill or start to age. Care and dependency are inextricably part of our lives as human beings. These claims will be further explored and explained throughout this chapter.

## 5.2 What are the student teachers' understandings of autism and inclusion?

### 5.2.1 Autism

Autism is defined by the National Autistic Society (NAS, 2018) as 'a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them'. Autism was described by the participants in different ways but most participants, nine out of ten, described autism in relation to communication differences. For example, Sophie mentioned how autism can impact on social interaction and Isla referred to autism as a 'social communication disorder'. Sophie and Diane talked about the difficulties with eye contact which Caldwell (2005) states can be painful for autistic individuals and Pat and Sophie discussed the complications with figurative language use. Isla, Pat, Diane and Melanie also discussed the latter part of the NAS (2018) statement in relation to sensory differences impacting on how an autistic person may experience the world around them.

The impact on differences in 'how a person communicates with and relates to other people' (NAS, 2018) is especially important when considering ethics of care as this approach is 'fundamentally relational' (Noddings, 2002:xiii). Communication with autistic learners needs to take into account these differences and preferred ways of communicating in order that the intended inclusive and caring practice is actually received by the person as caring. Difficulties in navigating social communication can result in the teacher, as the one caring, making decisions based on their own ideas of how they would like to be cared for instead of considering how that caring act is being received. An assumption of what constitutes care may be detrimental to the relationship between the teacher and the learner. Noddings (2002) highlights the requirement of responding to individuals and their differing needs. An understanding of autism and

individual communication needs could support the inclusion of autistic learners. Noddings (2012: 773) states that 'the response of the cared-for completes the caring relation'. However, the absence of recognition and responsiveness from some autistic learners towards the teacher and lack of demonstrable appreciation which may arise from not understanding the social expectations, may result in a negative interaction and affect the relationship between the carer - the teacher, and the cared for - the learner.

Suzy, Michelle, Sophie and Paul all commented on their growing knowledge of autism through their practical teaching experiences on the programme, although none of them claimed to be secure in their knowledge of autism. For example, Suzy highlighted how she was not 'a specialist' and Paul stated he still had a lot to learn. Not surprisingly, knowledge of autism was greater in the participants who had taken the learning difficulties and disabilities pathway than those who had done other routes. The exception to this was Pat, who despite doing the English Literacy and Language Specialists route, had personal experience that informed her understanding of autism. Pat, Diane, Melanie and Isla all discussed sensory differences and the impact this can have on teaching and learning when those responsible for teaching do not have an awareness of variations in sensory perception. This understanding of sensory differences and the importance of ensuring the environment is autism friendly demonstrates how knowledge can impact on caring for others. As an ethics of care is a needs and response based ethic (Noddings, 1992), teachers have a responsibility to attend to the sensory needs of learners. If teachers are uninformed of the impact the environment can have on learners, they may not even think about making adaptations. This lack of attention to the senses may impact on the inclusion of autistic learners as learners may withdraw from 'overwhelming sensation' (Singer, 2017) or display behaviour which might be interpreted as challenging (Lawson, 2011) as a reaction to the inhospitable setting.

Disruptive or challenging behaviour was highlighted by Paul, Melanie, Sophie, Robert, and Michelle as a characteristic associated with autism. The behaviour experienced by the participants was described by both Paul and Michelle as *'disruptive'* and by Sophie as *'quite challenging…irrational… withdrawn … and anti-social'*. Attempts to self-regulate through leaving the classroom for 45-minutes as described by Sophie, is often a result of overwhelming sensory input leading to heightened anxiety (Bogdashina, 2005; Davidson, 2007; Pellicano, 2013). Enhanced anxiety might lead to outward aggression which Lawson (2011) suggests may be due to the inability to cope with the situation. Both Robert and Melanie recounted instances of challenging physical behaviour they had experienced in specialist provisions. Robert explained how these experiences had led to his

understanding of managing behaviour. Although Melanie highlighted how the reason for behaviour may not be apparent to others, she commented on using pro-active strategies to support learners demonstrating attentiveness to those she has responsibility for which, as suggested by Held (2005) is the main focus of an ethic of care.

Although most of the participants gained understanding through either their personal or professional experiences, Robert and Paul talked about the impact of the media on perceptions of autism. Gregor & Campbell (2001) discussed how damaging notions of autism in the media may result in trepidation amongst teachers without experience of autism. If neurodivergent differences are not discussed in teacher education programmes, people understand autism through what they have been exposed to through personal experience or through the media. If the media depictions are negative this may lead to harmful attitudes and possible fear of someone with a label of autism. This was discussed with Paul who had acknowledged that his concept of autism has come from what he had seen on television programmes that portrayed a narrow view of autism and showed people on the spectrum as being isolated. This negative media influence alongside limited exposure to teaching autistic learners may have added to the anxiety some of the participants felt around including autistic learners. Robert also discussed how the portrayal of autistic stereotypes in the media has influenced his own interactions with colleagues who he claimed held assumptions about autistic people which arise from media depictions. He discussed how his own diagnosis of autism did not present as the notions held by his peers which suggest a homogenous group of people who are unable to communicate, develop meaningful relationships or travel independently. Although Robert suggested that more recently produced television dramas have started to show characters on the autism spectrum in a more positive light, the need for training, and particularly for autistic people to be involved in the training, was something that could be improved in initial teacher education programmes. This echoes the disability rights 'Nothing About Us Without Us' movement and the more recent neurodiversity movement (Dyck & Russell, 2020).

To summarise, the participants' understanding of autism was varied and although Paul and Robert mentioned the influence of the media, knowledge of autism was based on both personal and professional experiences prior to starting the PGCE and whilst studying the programme. The next part of this section will review the participants' understanding of inclusion.

### 5.2.2 Inclusion

As expected, due to the differing interpretations of inclusion previously highlighted (Armstrong *et al*., 2011; Norwich & Nash, 2011), the participants differed on their concepts of inclusion from broad and all-encompassing to narrow definitions of ensuring learners with SEND are included in regular educational settings. When asked to articulate a definition, Paul, Melanie and Suzy struggled to explain inclusion and this could be attributed to varying conceptualisations of the term. However, Paul highlighted the importance of the teacher acknowledging their responsibility to include all learners, Melanie discussed adapting to meet the needs of learners to ensure inclusion and Suzy emphasised the importance of treating everyone as an individual with unique experiences. Suzy also mentioned recognition of learners' feelings as significant to inclusive practice and this reflects Kittay's (2011b:52) explanation of 'investment in another's well-being' as essential to the practice of care.

Robert, who had completed the learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) pathway, tended to consider inclusion in the narrower sense of including learners with SEND into a mainstream or regular provision, whilst others discussed inclusion in broader terms focusing on the diversity of all learners as suggested by Norwich & Nash (2011). For example, inclusion was defined by Sarah as *'an equitable division of resources'* but by Robert as *'about having moved on from SEND being in a separate provision and being part of mainstream learning'*. This suggests that a participant's own experiences on programme influences their concept of inclusion. On the LDD pathway there is a focus on the inclusion of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities specifically which may attribute to this narrower explanation of inclusion by Robert, whilst those on other programmes might have a more varied discussion of the different factors and diversity of all learners impacting on inclusive practice. Nevertheless, across the programmes there was no clear divide between the participants' articulation of inclusion. These findings were similar to that of Alexiadou *et al*. (2016:11) who examined how a teacher education course in England prepared student teachers for inclusive practice in science teaching. They found when asked to define inclusion most participants suggested 'the right to learning' or similar variations. Extending beyond a rights-based approach, Pat suggested inclusion '*to be that welcoming teacher'* and this aligns with Noddings (2006) who asserts teachers attend to the learners they care for and Kittay (2011b) who discusses the importance of investment in relationships.

Although the concept of inclusion was encouraging in that the participants discussed equitable rights, adapting to meet individual needs and welcoming diversity, when considering actual practice the perceived realities of including autistic learners impacted on attitudes towards inclusion and this will be discussed next.

### 5.3 What are the student teachers' attitudes towards including autistic learners?

Attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic learners were generally positive. Similar to findings by Avramidis & Norwich (2002), who found teachers with positive experiences of teaching learners with SEN were more optimistic towards inclusion, the participants in this study who had planned and organised experiences of teaching learners on the autism spectrum demonstrated a confident attitude towards inclusion. However, some responses demonstrate how a minority of the participants perceived the inclusion of autistic learners as an added burden, particularly when the learner displayed disruptive behaviour, and considered such learners might be better placed in specialist provision more equipped to cater for their needs. Some participants, for example Melanie and Sarah believed that those who can fit in to the norm with minimal adjustments would be included easily and those that require a higher level of support might be better placed in a separate, specialist provision. It was expressed by these two participants that an organisation staffed by specialists in SEND would be a more suitable way of educating learners on the spectrum, in particular those learners whose behaviour impacted on the education of others.

Tronto (1993) discusses moral boundaries and explains how an ethic of care perspective supports us to notice what is included and what is excluded. My findings demonstrate that some student teachers consider learners on the autism spectrum should be included insofar as their behaviour ensures they are not a negative impact on the other learners or too much of a drain on the teachers' time. This shows a leaning to societal norms where those who cannot conform are excluded. Rather than the facilitation of change, we instead accept 'the level of belonging people are deemed to be capable of' (Jarret, 2020:12). Reflecting the cultural hegemony of the neurotypical population, Meir (2018) suggests the delivery of discrete provision is exclusionary practice. Until fairly recently, the separation between 'mainstream' schooling and 'special education' rested upon the idea of separate kinds of education for different kinds of child' (Armstrong *et al.*, 2011:29). This attitude to separateness exists in my findings. Both Paul and Sarah agree that there should be separate pathways for student teachers specialising in LDD/SEND.

However, Thomas & Whitburn (2019:170) argue 'grouping students into socially constructed groups ...only serve to compound their marginalisation'. Tomlinson (2012) suggests that despite the movement towards inclusion, the rise in SEN provision is partly a response to the need to separate those learners who were likely to be useful in post-industrial societies and those who were unlikely to be profitable and partly to do with the increasingly expensive SEN industry which services to keep SEND professionals in employment. As Tronto (2013:10) points out, 'there is no way to remove power and interest from affecting how care practices are organized'. Keeping special education and inclusive education systems that coexist support the number of professionals needed in both mainstream and specialist provisions. Teachers' attitudes depend on their knowledge and experience and the existence of two systems, 'mainstream' and 'specialist', reinforces that 'mainstream' teachers do not need to know about specific groups of students. This dual model could add to the notion that mainstream teachers do not need to have the knowledge or skills to support learners with SEND as this is the role and responsibility of a specialist SEN teacher.

The 1996 Tomlinson report on inclusive learning in Further Education (Tomlinson, 1997) drew attention to the injustices students with learning difficulties and disabilities faced within the education sector and called for a move away from discrete provision to a more inclusive approach. A narrow curriculum, underachieving learners lacking in confidence and exclusion from mainstream opportunities were highlighted. The report played a key role in widening participation in the post-compulsory sector for learners with learning difficulties or disabilities. This document called for a move away from labelling learners and to see people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties first and foremost as learners who should be supported towards adult status. The report advocated the redesign of the process of learning and assessment to match the needs of the learners and to embrace learners with LDD within the general approach for all learners.

'Special education needs' is a contested term (Hodkinson, 2019) yet still used in education policy in England. The Children and Families Act (2014, section 20:1) states:

> a child or young person has special educational needs if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her.

Labelling learners as 'special' seems to contradict the opinion that we are a diverse human race. If policy in England continues to use the term 'special needs' it is no wonder that teachers view the inclusion of autistic learners as exceptional, an added requirement to their role. The term 'SEND' has deficit overtones and is linked to the medical model of

disability which locates a problem in the learners that needs to be fixed (Thomas & Woods, 2003). These assumptions may still exist due to the medical perspective in education which views SEND as a deficit and the responsibility of specialist practitioners rather than a collective responsibility (Chiner & Cardona, 2013). However, Tomlinson (2012:279) argues that this divide between general and specialist practitioners has been driven not only by social justice principles but 'by parental needs and professional vested interests'. Indeed Alexiadou & Essex (2016:7) argue the exclusion or marginalisation of certain groups of learners is a system designed for the purpose of placing people in employment and maintaining social hierarchies.

Inclusion has been described as 'a way of challenging the restrictions to access and participation' (Armstrong *et al.,* 2011:30). Society makes choices about who is included and who is excluded. The exclusion of autistic learners was a source of anxiety for some participants in this study, especially Pat, Melanie and Isla, who had personal experience of family or close friends at risk of exclusion due to behaviour associated with autism. Noddings (1992:67) emphasises the need for learners to feel a sense of belonging and stability and stresses 'we must stop moving children from place to place in order to solve social problems or "satisfy their developmental needs"'. My findings suggest that like research conducted by Brede *et al.* (2017) and Moore (2016) and affirmation from the DfE (2015) that states autistic learners are excluded more often than their neurotypical peers, some of the participants felt that autistic learners are often misunderstood by teachers and this puts them at risk of being excluded. Melanie described the exclusions from mainstream provisions of learners she works with as having a negative effect on their mental health which neither contributes to the solution of social problems nor fulfils their development needs. Exclusion is especially concerning as exclusions of autistic learners from schools in England has more than doubled in recent years (Cutting & Moore, 2019) and referred to as a 'scandal' by the Education Committee (2018).

Exclusion of learners by their peers due to having a label of autism was a concern Paul highlighted. He thought that delivering autism awareness sessions to the learners might lead to the identification of traits in peers and as a consequence might lead to seeing difference as a vulnerability and result in the bullying of autistic learners. Given the research that finds autistic students are more likely to be bullied in mainstream provisions than specialist settings (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014), this fear is not unfounded. Bullying experiences are common amongst young people on the autism spectrum (Cappadocia *et al.,* 2012). This susceptibility to bullying is often due to misunderstanding social norms or difficulties interpreting non-literal language (Humphrey & Hebron, 2015). However,

limiting awareness and social contact with autistic peers does nothing to support understanding of diversity and difference. Positive teacher attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic learners and the quality of the teacher-learner relationship can influence the way a learner is perceived by their peers (Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003) and this has implications for their inclusion in the learning environment.

As described by Lawson (2011) and Williams (1996), sensory perception differences can result in elevated stress levels for autistic people and can impact on behaviour. The behaviour displayed is often an attempt to escape or block out the overwhelming sensory input experienced by the person. In a school or college, whether mainstream or specialist, there are a multitude of factors that can impact on or overload sensory receptors, for example crowds and noise. When teachers are unaware of such differences and how they can affect a person's ability to cope in the environment, this can become a problem. For example, Isla discussed her brother's response to a school sport's day event and how he hid to escape the situation. Intensified stress such as this can lead to behaviour which is not understood and therefore perceived as challenging. Teachers' misunderstandings of behaviour as a result of sensory overload can result in labelling and exclusion. In order to be inclusive, teachers should be able to respond to individual differences and educate all learners together. In this study, student teachers who had taken the LDD pathway discussed how they were aware of sensory differences and took this into account when planning and delivering learning. Pat, specialising in teaching English, was very aware of how sensory differences can impact on a person, but this knowledge came from personal experience and not from the ITE curriculum. The majority of participants on pathways other than the LDD route did not mention sensory differences which suggests more coverage of this topic should be brought into the ITE curriculum in order that autistic learners are understood and the risk of exclusion from educational provisions for these learners reduced.

Although separate provisions may have their place, policy states learners should be educated in general mainstream classrooms as far as possible (DfE & DoH, 2015). So, ITE programmes need to address this shift in policy to reduce the rise in exclusions of autistic learners which is often due to behaviour resulting from unmet needs. An understanding of the impact of the environment on learners' behaviour has the potential to result in changes being made to the setting by a teacher who could take the time to care to find out underlying causes and adjust accordingly to ensure the learner is comfortable in the environment. A safe and supportive environment is the starting point in creating an optimal environment conducive to learning. In order to support the social inclusion of

people on the autism spectrum, factors impacting on inclusion need to be addressed and this will be covered in the following section.

## 5.4 What do student teachers consider as factors impacting on the inclusion of autistic learners?

From my findings the main issues impacting on inclusive practice raised by the participants were lack of resources, scarcity of time, and not being specialists in the area of learning difficulties and disabilities. Tronto (1993:110) states 'care depends upon adequate resources: on material goods, on time and on skills'. These resources were felt to be lacking by the participants. As discussed in the findings chapter, the pressures of time and a heavy workload can lead to student teachers feeling overwhelmed with little time to consider adjustments for autistic learners. This section will consider how resources, time and skills development were perceived as factors impacting on the inclusion of autistic learners.

### 5.4.1 Resources

Absence of resources prevents care-givers, in this case student teachers, to do their best for their learners. With respect to material goods, Sarah explained how few resources were available to support teaching practice in her placement and recalled how her mentor bought resources from her own personal funds. This demonstrates how the teacher put the learners' needs before her own and that through purchasing resources to help them learn, she showed care for her learners. However, it also suggests that the organisation is not meeting the needs of the teacher or the learners in this situation as adequate resources are not being provided.

The human resource in the form of learning support assistants (LSAs), although valued by Michelle and Isla, impacted on some of the participants' ability to include autistic learners. These circumstances included lack of availability of LSAs to support inclusive practice as highlighted by Paul and Suzy, or unhelpful attitudes displayed by LSAs as described by Robert whose LSA reportedly spent most of her time on the phone and neglected her duty towards the learner she was supporting.

Operationalising care through showing interest in individuals, adapting resources and communication methods can support the inclusion of autistic learners, although it must be acknowledged that the emotional labour of caring practice can impact on teachers' ability to care and on their own self-care. Doing more for less – less time, less resources – interferes with the student teachers' ability to care for learners (Boujut, Popa-Roch, Palomares, Dean & Cappe, 2017). The climate of austerity in England resulting in doing more for less can impact on the teachers' ability to develop reciprocal relationships.

### 5.4.2 Time

Time, the second resource suggested by Tronto (1993), was also highlighted as a concern by the participants in my study who felt the pressure of being time poor. Stressed in this study, one of the major impacting factors to inclusive practice with respect to autistic learners is time. Whether that is time to discuss, collaborate with others, or time to plan and create resources to meet individual needs. Similar to findings by Thomas & Whitburn (2019), Suzy and Paul felt there was a lack of time to enable them to fulfil all aspects of their job role and to address the demands of being responsive to learners. Although quality assurance processes are important, Paul felt too much time was taken up with paperwork and insuring documentation was in place for Ofsted. Diane also commented on the 'heavy' paperwork load and thought if this was reduced, then teachers would have more time to spend with autistic learners. Streamlining these processes could free up teachers' time in order that they would be able to spend more time caring for their learners. The responsibility to support individuals in a way that they feel cared for seemed to weigh heavy on Suzy. She recalled how she felt both she and her organisation had let down a learner due to lack of time to consider his individual needs, which resulted in too many changes to his timetable and his withdrawal from the course.

Melanie explained how, from her observations of teachers in mainstream schools, she believed teachers did not spend as much time with learners with learning difficulties and disabilities as they did with their non-disabled peers. This reflects concerns highlighted by Giangreco (2003) that learners with learning difficulties or disabilities often receive primary instruction from a teaching assistant. If equal time is not allocated, it suggests that autistic learners are not as valued as the majority. It was not only time to care for the learners that was a concern. Time for mentors to spend with student teachers was also commented on by Suzy who highlighted how the pressures on time-poor teachers meant she felt reluctant to ask for support. Care costs in terms of time and emotional

demands (Kittay, 2001) and therefore it is imperative that this is recognised within educational establishments.

### 5.4.3 Skills

The third resource Tronto (1993) stated was skills. When skills are considered in terms of the abilities of student teachers to include autistic learners in the classroom, the responses varied according to experience. Those who had theoretical knowledge and practical experiences of working with autistic learners felt more confident in the acquisition of skills to teach autistic learners whilst those with not as much experience were less confident. In their research in the US and Australia on teacher efficacy, Love, Toland, Usher, Campbell & Spriggs (2019:43) asked 'teachers to judge their capabilities for teaching one-specific student with ASD and compare that to their perceptions about teaching in general'. They found 'teaching students with autism and teaching students in general are seen as two different constructs' (Love *et al.*, 2019:48). There were similar beliefs from participants in this study who claimed to not have specialist knowledge to effectively include autistic learners. This reflects the argument by Norwich & Nash (2011) who claim the supposed specialist nature of a SEND teacher supports feelings by general teachers that they do not possess such skills. This belief can reinforce the concept of difference.

'Care involves conflict' (Tronto, 1993:109). This can be seen in the many choices teachers must make in relation to how much of their working time they allocate to adapting resources, to collaborating with others and fulfilling the administrative requirements of the job role. This conflict can often arise as 'those who determine how needs will be met are far away from the actual care-giving and care-receiving' (Tronto, 1993:109). In the case of education, the decisions made at policy and organisational level impact on the ability of student teachers to fully demonstrate care in practice. The education system is based on economic concerns but teaching, as part of ethics of care, is time-consuming and expensive and consequently it is problematic. An ethic of care which can be labour-intensive yet not profit-making, is in opposition to the neoliberal perspective of competition, driving improvement and increasing efficiency in productivity. Yet, ample resources and time allocation, alongside collaboration with specialist autism practitioners could lead to a greater possibility of conditions created which supports all learners to thrive.

Walker & Gleaves (2016) assert it is the teachers' obligation to care and this extends to all learners. Indeed, this obligation is exemplified in point six of the Professional Standards (ETF, 2014) for the sector which overtly states teachers should 'build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues and learners'. So, it is imperative that student teachers acquire knowledge and skills whilst on programme to support the inclusion of autistic learners. The next section will explore how well the student teachers felt they were prepared to support the inclusion of autistic learners.

### 5.5 What are the student teachers' opinions on how well the PGCE prepares them to support autistic learners?

Love *et al*. (2019) note that one of the most challenging groups to teach is learners on the autistic spectrum. Teachers' effectiveness in the classroom is influenced by a number of factors including experiences, attitudes and perceptions. How effectively teaching learners on the autism spectrum was covered in their initial teacher education programme has an impact on student teachers' self-efficacy. It is important to consider the student teachers' feelings and beliefs around their own capability and listen and respond to their fears and concerns. My findings suggest that student teachers on the learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) pathway had developed confidence and strategies to include autistic learners through the duration of their programme. However, those on other pathways with fewer experiences did not feel as prepared to support autistic learners. This reflects research by Ellis and Tod (2014) and Webster and Blatchford (2014) who found teachers did not feel sufficiently prepared to teach or meet the challenges of including learners with SEND, and Able *et al*. (2015) and Talib & Paulson (2015) who found many teachers did not feel prepared to meet the needs of learners on the autism spectrum.

#### 5.5.1 Practical experience

The SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) calls for most learners to be included in general education, however, my findings suggest that the PGCE programmes are not adequately preparing student teachers to be able to include all learners in their classrooms. The vast difference of experience and theoretical content experienced by the participants reflects the contexts they were in and the pathways they had taken.

Suzy considered the practical experience of working with a range of learners was key to preparing her to include all learners and this reflects findings by Campbell, Gilmore & Cuskelly (2003), Florin, Fogarty & Carroll, (1999), Hastings, Hewes, Lock & Witting (1996) and Rodríguez *et al*. (2012) who claim level of contact with learners with disabilities is a significant influence in shaping positive attitudes towards disability. Dedicating time to have direct experience with autistic learners also helps to dispel misconceptions and can improve attitudes towards the autistic community (Kuzminski *et al.*, 2019)

Researchers have found that spending time with people with disabilities will support more positive attitudes towards diversity (Brownlee & Carrington, 2000). In a study by Gregor & Campbell (2001) in Scotland, teachers reported positive attitudes from mainstream teachers towards the inclusion of autistic learners following experiences of teaching autistic learners. Undertaking a placement with autistic learners or a study of a particular learner may be beneficial in developing student teachers' confidence in their own skills and help to foster positive attitudes towards inclusion. The issue of enough placement partners with effective pedagogical practice towards the inclusion of autistic learners may impact on the quality of experience a student may have and the dilemma of where to place student teachers when the number requiring placements exceed the number of placements available is often faced by ITE programme leaders (Sharma & Sokal, 2015). Ensuring experience of teaching autistic learners on a ITE programme in further education (FE) is significantly more difficult than compulsory school ITE programmes to arrange. This is because often teachers on post-compulsory ITE programmes are already in-service at the start of their PGCE and would not be able to be released from work for a placement in a specialist provision.

### 5.5.2 Support from Mentors

Teaching placements and support from mentors in placement also had an impact on how prepared the participants felt for inclusive practice with respect to autistic learners. Pat and Sarah both suggested they would go to straight to their mentor for practice-based support and Michelle noted how helpful her mentors had been with practical guidance. However, Sophie considered her mentor was not particularly forthcoming with sharing information or supporting her developing knowledge of strategies to support autistic learners.

Support from others is one of the most significant factors affecting teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (Avramidis *et al.*, 2000) so it is crucial that mentors in placement are also offered continuing professional development and support in developing inclusive practice with respect to autistic learners. As Sanz-Cervera *et al.* (2017:221) found that obtaining specialised training beyond completing university had a considerable influence on teachers' knowledge of autism.

Sophie also considered the theory on autism had been too little and too late on the programme for her to translate theory to practice and had developed her own ways of working based on experience alone. This lack of access to appropriate support was highlighted by Lindsay *et al.* (2013) as a challenge to supporting inclusion and is an area that could be addressed through continuing professional development to support mentors in placement to develop confidence in supporting student teachers with guidance relating to autistic learners socially, academically and behaviourally.

### 5.5.3 Support from Peers

One of the important aspects highlighted by some of the participants was how they felt they had learned from each other about inclusive practice through class discussions. Both Michelle and Robert emphasised the value of sharing experiences and practical strategies with peers across the pathways. Indeed, Michelle commented on the benefit of listening to her peers on placement in specialist provisions and how this affected her own teaching practice.

As sharing practice was seen as beneficial, further opportunities for collaboration across the pathways could enhance knowledge and understanding of supporting the inclusion of autistic learners. There may be some opportunity for classes to be taught together for some of the core modules. Taking this approach, student teachers could take further ownership of their own professional development. Student teachers on the learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) pathway would be provided with opportunities to share their experiences of teaching autistic learners and support other student teachers with information and strategies to enhance inclusive practice. This would go some way to reducing the idea that autistic learners are solely the responsibility of specialists and move to a more collaborative approach. This increased interaction could also improve attitudes towards inclusion as understanding of diversity is developed.

### 5.5.4 Theory

The amount of content given to discussing autism during PGCE lessons varied. The students doing the Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (LDD) pathway felt the theory was sufficient whilst those on other pathways, for example Pat and Sarah, recalled that they had had no specific input on including autistic learners. Sophie felt that while attention was given to autism in the second stage of her programme this was not sufficient and was provided too late in programme.

Some participants, Sarah, Michelle and Paul, considered a knowledge of autism was no more necessary than a knowledge of any other disability and did not believe this topic should be given extra consideration on the PGCE programmes. However, this contrasted with Pat's view that neurodiversity is an aspect that could be strengthened on the programme and Robert's opinion that an enhancement to the initial education programmes would be the inclusion of autistic guest speakers. Diane, Isla, Robert and Melanie were also of the opinion that autism should be given further consideration on initial teacher education programmes to support understanding and inclusion.

Having addressed the original questions I sought to answer, the next section will discuss other key findings as a result of this study. Starting with an exploration of ethics of care in educational organisations, I will then suggest how care towards autistic learners could be addressed through developing knowledge and cultivating attitudes in student teachers. I will then explore how in order to nurture caring teachers, it is essential to demonstrate care towards student teachers and consider how this can be demonstrated. This section will conclude with a discussion of the role of ITE programmes in creating inclusive teachers.

## 5.6 Developing knowledge and cultivating caring attitudes in teachers

It is essential to care for teachers coming into the profession and undertaking teaching qualifications to support them to consider the diversity of learners and put those learners at the forefront. This links to the first phase of care proposed by Tronto (1993), to care about, which involves attention to the needs of others. The second dimension of care, as suggested by Tronto (1993) is that of responsibility. There are contractual obligations a teacher must fulfil but in addition to these responsibilities is the responsibility to care for

their learners. What this entails in practice can be ambiguous but examples from the participants suggest a responsiveness to the needs of their learners, thus demonstrating care. For example, Diane explained how she bought puppets in response to seeing a learner engage with these and developed interaction with said learner through the utilisation of the puppets. This supported the learner to develop their voice and initiate interaction. Similarly, communication needs were met by Isla who explained how she used visual supports and visual timers for a particular learner to support focus on a task. Michelle responded to the strengths of a learner by allocating responsibility to set up and collect equipment to manage his hyper-activity in sessions. Robert demonstrated care for a learner he was supporting through eating lunch with him and playing ball games to develop a connection. This responsiveness demonstrates that the student teachers take their responsibility to care seriously and as Held (2005) suggests, this attendance to needs for those for whom we take responsibility for is a fundamental focus of the ethics of care.

The competence to care, or care giving to ensure care needs are met, is the third factor stated by Tronto (1993). The interaction between the teacher and the learner within the learning environment, through talking, explaining, and providing feedback are examples of care giving. The examples from participants Sophie and Michelle who reflected on practice and adapted to improve the experience of their learners, demonstrates care giving to those they have a responsibility for. In Suzy's example of spending extra time with a learner in order to support him to complete the course, this act of caring may be viewed as going above and beyond the expectations placed on her as a teacher. The choice Suzy made to put in the extra effort to care for the learner was recognised by management and this could well have supported the capacity for her to feel cared-for in her role, which in turn could have helped Suzy to care for the learner.

When considering how student teachers' actions in the classroom are received by learners on the autism spectrum, this discord between the act of caring and the receiving of care should be examined. The example that Suzy provided of wanting to organise a learner's file as it would be easier and quicker is an illustration of how Suzy reflected on her possible actions and how they might be received by the learner whose sense of agency could be diminished with such an action.

The actions taken in an attempt to care for their learners might not always be received as caring. For example, Michelle, attempting with the best of intentions to include an autistic learner in a group discussion, resulted in the learner leaving the classroom for forty-five minutes due to anxiety induced by the situation. Understanding and ensuring needs are addressed in a way desired by the cared for is important to support inclusion.

However, communication with individuals on the autism spectrum might be more difficult for student teachers to facilitate, as Noddings explains there may be a distance 'because we have difficulty in either eliciting or recognizing forms of response with which we are familiar' (Noddings, 1992:124).

The notion of a deficit in theory of mind was espoused by Baron-Cohen (1995) who suggested autistic people have mind blindness. This refers to the ability to put oneself in another's shoes or to lack awareness of another person's perspective or mental state resulting in inappropriate social responses. Baron-Cohen, Knickmeyer & Belmonte (2005:631) suggested this apparent lack of empathy can impede 'normal reciprocal relationships'. This viewpoint that there is such a thing as a 'normal' response conflicts with the idea of neurodiversity and acceptance of difference. Milton (2012:884) argues that rather than defining autism as a behavioural, neurological or 'pathological deviance from expected functional stages of development' which leads to treatments and modifications of behaviour to enable a person to fit into the mainstream society, it would be better to reframe such issues 'as a question of reciprocity and mutuality'. This viewpoint is compatible with ethics of care. The 'double empathy problem' is described by Milton (2012:884) as 'a disjuncture in reciprocity between two differently disposed social actors which becomes more marked the wider the disjuncture in dispositional perceptions of the lifeworld'. Those with very different experiences of the world will likely struggle to empathise with the other and this, claims Mitchell, Sheppard, & Cassidy (2021), can lead to autistic people being perceived unfavourably. Rather than placing the autistic person as the one with the deficit, it is important to recognise that both actors need to work to understand the other.

Student teachers may have the intention to care and accept responsibility for this caring role but if they do not have the knowledge or skills to include autistic learners, they will have failed in their attempt to care. It is not the fault of the student teachers, but those who are responsible for designing and delivering the curriculum and the government who drive the move towards inclusion but who do not allocate sufficient resources to fulfil the promise of the policy. Ofsted's (2020b) investigation into curriculum quality in ITE found a variation in attention to teaching learners with SEND. This disparity was often as a result of teacher educators' expertise and knowledge in this area; even student teachers on programmes in the same organisation were receiving very different experiences in relation to SEND content and practical experience. This diversity of experience is reflective of my own findings as some participants felt very prepared to teach autistic learners whilst others did not feel as confident to do so. When the Carter Review

(2015:24) emphasises that all teachers are potentially teachers of SEND and states initial teacher training (ITT) 'should prepare all new teachers to support SEND in their classrooms' and there is an increasing number of autistic learners attending mainstream schools and progressing onto further and higher education (Symes & Humphrey, 2010; Vincent, 2019), it is crucial that autism become part of the ITE curriculum for student teachers aiming to work in the post-compulsory sector. Ofsted (2020b) found practical teaching experience with learners with SEND, although a challenging aspect of the ITE curriculum, provides student teachers with a deeper understanding to meet the needs of a diverse range of learners.

The fourth dimension of care Tronto (1993) discusses is responsiveness. Responsiveness

> suggests that we consider the other's position as that other expresses it. Thus, one is engaged from the standpoint of the other, but not simply by presuming that the other is exactly like the self (Tronto, 1993: 136).

This is important to highlight as there are neurological differences to consider when preparing the learning environment for the inclusion of autistic learners. In particular sensory differences, a concern for four of the participants but not mentioned by the other six, would be beneficial to include on ITE programmes to support the student teachers to see things from a different point of view, the view of the learner which may be different to their own perspective. Tronto (1993:157) asserts 'to care well involves engagement in an ethical practice of complex moral judgments'. However, if student teachers are not informed about autism, the judgements they make regarding their own teaching practice with autistic learners may be flawed. An understanding of sensory differences would support responsiveness and inclusive practice as Norwich & Nash (2011:3) state inclusivity involves recognising 'individual characteristics and making some response to them as part of the general system of education'.

### 5.7 How care towards student teachers is essential – and how this can be demonstrated

Attentiveness, or 'caring about', Tronto's (1993) first moral aspect of caring, suggests the needs of student teachers involves listening to their worries. Tronto (1993:106) states 'caring about will often involve assuming the position of another person or group to recognize the need'. Recognition of the need, however, is not enough. Taking care of,

Tronto's (1993) second phase, suggests that in order to care, the recognition of needs should be acted upon. When considering student teachers' capability to include autistic learners, an understanding of autism and how it can impact on learning could support confidence in acting to address these needs. If a teacher believes it is not their responsibility to act when they recognise unmet needs and instead consider this to be the responsibility of a specialist teacher or support worker, then care is not happening. Tronto (1993:127) suggests 'attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness' are the ethical elements of care. In order to attend to the needs of others it is important to address one's own needs and so there is a responsibility on ITE programmes for teacher educators to demonstrate care for their student teachers. To demonstrate care and ensure competence in inclusive teaching practice, student teachers should be provided with opportunities to learn about autism, both theoretically and practically in order that the needs of their learners are not ignored. To ignore the needs of others is, according to Tronto (1993:127) 'a moral evil'. Recognising the needs of others, although often difficult, Tronto (1993:127) states is a 'moral achievement'.

Existing literature on care informed pedagogy, although partial and 'imperfectly theorized' (Walker & Gleaves, 2016:75), suggests caring teaching effects students not only personally and socially but academically as learners, through supportive relationships, are able to achieve intended learning outcomes. Caring is often perceived in academic contexts as 'low grade peripheral work' (Walker, Gleaves & Gray, 2006:349) done mainly by women in pastoral roles. However, this devaluing of care in higher education programmes, such as the PGCE, could fail to give attention to the difference caring relationships make to the development of competence.

As highlighted in the literature review, Bandura's (2008) notion of self-efficacy impacts an individual's competence to a execute a behaviour. If a person lacks confidence in their ability to accomplish the required actions, their behaviour will not change (Bandura, 1977). There are four keyways in which Bandura (2008) suggested self-efficacy could be built. These are: by mastery experiences; social modelling, social persuasion and physiological state. Providing opportunities for student teachers to experience teaching autistic learners would support mastery of experiences. Social modelling could be developed through student teachers observing their peers teach autistic learners as seeing people similar to themselves can raise their beliefs in their own ability to succeed. Social persuasion, according to Bandura (2008), can be valuable if the person encouraging the student teacher is knowledgeable and skilled in their area. The opportunity to work with autistic learners whilst on programme, along with supportive guidance and feedback on

practice by a qualified and experienced teacher and mentor in the area of autism could build self-efficacy. This nurturing of the student teacher demonstrates the importance of care. The development of a trusting and respectful relationship where feedback will be considered by the carer so that it is delivered with compassion and received without fear is important. Feedback received, whether positive or negative will impact on the student teacher as in these relationships 'nothing is neutral' (Florian & Linklater, 2010:372) and the physiological state of the student teacher is impacted. Reducing anxiety and changing negative states can be managed through regular feedback meetings with the student teacher as thoughts around their own ineptitude can lead 'to elevated levels of anxiety that far exceed the fear experienced during the actual threatening situation' (Bandura, 1977:199).

Beliefs in personal efficacy and resilience to adversities are fundamental to well-being. However, feeling capable as a teacher partly depends on the stresses placed upon them in the teaching environment. As seen in the data, some of the student teachers are employed in specialist autism provisions and do their teaching practice for the PGCE in this environment. This is unlike initial teacher education programmes in the compulsory sector as usually teachers do not become employed until qualified. However, in the post-compulsory sector it is common to have both pre-service and in-service teachers on an ITE programme. As recounted, there have been instances of physically challenging behaviour experienced by some student teachers resulting in actual bodily harm and absence from work. In one case reported, the student teacher felt unsupported by the management of her organisation. Following a behavioural incident where Melanie demonstrated that she cared for the learner who was physically attacking her in a moving vehicle, Melanie tried to escape and keep calm in order to deescalate the situation. As a result of the injury she sustained, Melanie had to take unpaid leave from work. The apparent lack of concern for her welfare from her manager during this period left Melanie feeling that they did not care about her.

Tronto's (1993) fourth phase is care-receiving. This phase 'recognizes that the object of care will respond to the care it receives' (Tronto, 1993:107). This means attention should be given to the way in which care is received. This phase is important as in order to know that care has been provided, an assessment of the caring needs being met needs to be completed. If a person caring assumes their actions are caring ones, yet their perception of a person's needs is incorrect, then the action is not one of care. In Melanie's case, the lack of contact from her manager whilst on sick leave may have been due to the manager thinking her actions of giving Melanie time to recuperate were caring ones, yet the lack of

contact was felt by Melanie to be un-caring. Of course, this is merely speculation but used as an example to highlight how a person's perceived caring actions may not be received as such.

In circumstances where student teachers are working in an environment where they experience behaviour that challenges, as Melanie described, it is important to ensure structures are in place to support their self-efficacy. In their study in the USA exploring school professionals' self-efficacy in relation to autistic learners, Corona, Christodulu & Rinaldi (2017) found prior training in autism was a significant predictor of self-efficacy for working with autistic learners and this self-efficacy increased with further training. Given the unique needs of these learners, high quality input around autism could support the development of self-efficacy in student teachers and ultimately provide a supportive learning environment and positive outcomes for learners on the autism spectrum.

In addition to developing competent and responsive student teachers with a belief in their own ability to manage an inclusive learning environment, it is also important to consider the well-being of the student teachers. Caring for self, Tronto (1993) maintains, is key to enable attentiveness to others. This selfcare is important in teaching and should not be overlooked at the risk of neglecting own needs. As Noddings (1986:100) states 'if caring is to be maintained, clearly, the one-caring must be maintained'. However, Tronto (1993:109) highlights how care-givers will often 'find that their need to care for themselves come in conflict with the care that they must give to others'. The well-being of teachers also needs to be considered in order that they can provide a safe and supportive space for learners to thrive. This is especially important when considering the inclusion of autistic learners as, conducting their research in France, Boujut *et al.* (2017:8) maintain that inclusion in schools of autistic learners 'is a source of stress for teachers'. Noddings (1986:12) warns of the risk attached to the one-caring of being overwhelmed by responsibilities and as result of such a burden he or she will cease to care for the other and become instead the object of "caring"'. Caregivers can 'become burned out by the constant outward flow of energy that is not replenished by the response of the cared- for' (Noddings, 1992:17).

Teachers who work in special education settings can experience job-related stress due to the high demands on both physical and mental energy; this can lead to feelings of inadequacy and can impact negatively on well-being, motivation and attitudes towards others (Robinson *et al.,* 2019). When a teacher feels like this, the relationship between them and their learners might suffer as 'a burnt out teacher will no longer be emotionally available to their students and can develop negative attitudes towards them' (*Boujut et*

*al.*, 2017:9). Hedge & Mackenzie (2012:193) highlight Noddings' omission of how emotions 'can enable or inhibit both the labour and attitude of care'. For this reason, it is also important to look after the student teachers' well-being through providing opportunities to talk about incidents and a safe space to reflect. When student teachers and teachers neglect their own caring needs for those of their learners, for example through working beyond their contracted hours or getting physically hurt in the process of trying to de-escalate a difficult situation, over a prolonged period of time they might come to resent the act of care-giving and leave the profession. The lack of care towards staff members felt by college teaching staff was highlighted twenty years ago by the Learning and Skills Development Agency (Davies & Owen, 2001). This sector wide questionnaire found teaching staff in the FE sector did not feel valued or cared about and this led to low levels of job satisfaction. With almost a third of teachers leaving the profession within five years of qualifying (DfE, 2018a), a more caring approach to the well-being of staff may result in lower attrition rates.

Kittay (2011a:615) asserts that we should 'imagine the world from the perspective of the one cared for' and that an affectionate attitude is required to provide the labour of caring in a virtuous manner or else the care provided cannot be good care (Kittay, 2001). However, as the participants in this study have expressed, even when you act with the best of intentions there are times when the demands of the curriculum interfere with the ability to fully care for individual learners. Noddings (2012:772) highlights this conflict and poses the question:

> When should teachers put aside the assumed need to learn a specific aspect of subject matter and address the expressed need of the student for emotional support, moral direction, or shared human interest?

Given the tight deadlines and restrictions on time expressed by the participants, it would be worthwhile addressing this question directly with the student teachers and create a dialogue whereby worries and solutions to problems can be discussed. A purposely designed school or college, as suggested by Noddings (1986:182), to care and support both staff and learners could be created. An atmosphere of support could be developed through modelling such an approach as teacher educators. Demonstrating care for student teachers through listening and responding to their needs and showing active concern for their development could support them to not only feel cared for but to carry caring behaviours into their own practice.

### 5.8 The role of ITE programmes in creating inclusive teachers

There is a legal and moral responsibility placed on teachers to include all learners, however, if these responsibilities cannot be met due to insufficient education or input on the ITE programme, then autistic learners will continue to experience social injustice. However, it is more than an individual responsibility. It is a structural, organisational issue that needs to be addressed if there is to be some levelling up of opportunity. The current education system and the initial training of teachers is set up in favour of neurotypicals. This systematic constraint on freedom to access education in an equal manner to the neurotypical population presents a barrier to fair and equitable education for all. To support a better education for autistic learners, the normative practices of post-compulsory education institutions could benefit from a shift from the individualistic, neoliberal agenda to one more focused on our inter-dependency, one focused on an ethic of care and inclusive practice. Central to human life, the importance of care is understated. Walker, Gleaves & Gray (2006) suggest although care is important in university teachers' work, this is an often overlooked aspect of practice. A lack of awareness, content, or experiential practice related to autism on the PGCE could perpetuate a practice that is more likely to exclude, than include, autistic learners. Without change, social injustices of oppression and exclusion will continue. It is important not to romanticise care, but an increased focus on ethics of care within ITE could foster an upturn in positive attitudes and hopefully improve not only the confidence of student teachers to support autistic learners but also enhance the quality of life of their learners.

Tronto (1993) starts from the assumption that in order for human beings to flourish society needs to be liberal, democratic and pluralistic. This notion of a diverse society, where people can be part of a minority group but still feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to the wider society, could be supported by an education system that is designed to promote understanding of neurodiversity. Tronto (2013:157) claims that if 'people are more attuned to others' needs, they are more likely to be better at caring for them'. This supports the argument for autism to be a part of the ITE curriculum as if student teachers are more aware of the needs of autistic learners, they will be better equipped to care for them. 'The primary aim of every teacher must be to promote the growth of students as competent, caring, loving, and lovable people' (Noddings, 1992:154). It is the responsibility of educators to teach learners how to care for each other. If we can nurture student teachers through their initial education programmes, then we may be more likely to see new teachers caring for their learners in a way that meets their needs and thus supports inclusion. It is important to remember that when

talking about needs, we are actually talking about rights. Considering 'needs' might suggest there is a choice on the teachers' behalf to meet those needs, to care for the learner. However, a rights-based approach obliges student teachers to look at care from a duty perspective, that is to care to meet the needs of the learners because they have a right to an education that meets their needs. The way in which rights is understood 'transforms the understanding of care and relationships' (Gilligan, 2003:138). In order to address the continual perpetuation of inequality in education, it is imperative that autism becomes part of the ITE curriculum.

Noddings has been criticised for her version of caring for 'her unwillingness to consider the institutional and structural setting for her ideal of caring (Tronto, 1993:160). She also omits to explore 'how we might cope with conflict' (Tronto, 1993:160), yet these conflicts or tensions between being responsive to learners' needs and performativity requirements of the organisation and regulatory bodies were discussed by Paul and Suzy. The capacities of teachers to care for their learners are diminished through time constraints, high workload, and lack of training and support.

Tronto (2013:104) uses the term 'privileged responsibility' to refer to the ways in which some individuals can excuse themselves from caring responsibilities due to distribution of labour and societal values as 'they have other and more important work to perform'. Misinterpretation of policy or ignorance of the needs of an autistic learner are two examples of 'privileged responsibility'. Tronto (1993:20) states that the interests of the 'relatively powerless are omitted from the central concerns of society'. My research findings suggest autistic learners are omitted from either the PGCE curriculum content or considered as an afterthought, an add-on, in the form of an optional module that the student teachers can choose to take. There are various levels of power at play here which lead to autistic learners' needs being neglected. Organisationally, the leadership and management team of the college decide on module and delivery design. Teacher educators have the power to include, as much as time allows and the curriculum dictates, how much they cover autism and education. The student teachers decide on the pathways they take and the optional modules they wish to study. It is not surprising then, through all of these layers of power, that including learners on the autism spectrum can slide down the list of priorities.

It is important that people in positions of power address their responsibilities in working towards a more equitable education system. Different actors with varying levels of power can address their caring responsibilities in relation to the inclusion of autistic learners. National policy in the form of the Carter Review (2015) suggests all teachers are potential

teachers of SEND, yet the amount of SEND content on the ITE curriculum, as evident in my findings and supported in other research by Richards (2010), Ellis and Tod (2014) and Webster and Blatchford (2014) is variable and insufficient to develop the confidence in student teachers to include learners on the autism spectrum. Ofsted and the key areas of judgement detailed in the Education Inspection Framework (2019) have more of a focus on SEND which will influence leadership and management of organisations. Leadership and management of educational organisations also have a part to play in overcoming the structural injustices through reviewing curriculum content and access for all learners. They have a responsibility for reviewing and revising curriculum offer, ensuring training meets professional development needs, and for creating an ethos of inclusion throughout the organisation. Degrees of power to influence and change are also apparent at the teacher educator and teacher level who have a responsibility to challenge the structural processes that lead to social injustices and to rectify unjust systems. Modelling inclusive practice and enabling open conversations around issues related to inclusive practice with respect to autistic learners are ways to support the development of inclusive practice. The student teacher also has a level of power through reading theory, reflecting on practice, and planning for inclusive teaching.

Care may not be the panacea to ensure all autistic learners are included, however studies have shown that teacher care has a positive impact on inclusion (Tang, Walker-Gleaves & Rattray, 2021). Acceptance of autistic learners by teachers in post compulsory education may foster a broader change in societal acceptance. The competence to care could be met through completion of initial teacher education programmes where a focus is on not just developing teachers to teach their subject but in also developing caring teachers. This suggests a collective competence, rather than an individualistic approach. Ensuring student teachers feel part of a community, which Michelle mentioned as being very important to her development, could support care competency as individuals can share practice and learn from each other. Communities of practice and observations of each other's teaching practice are two ways that might be beneficial in developing a sense of belonging and these will be considered in the final chapter.

# Chapter 6: Conclusions

The aim of this research was to explore the perceptions, experiences and attitudes of student teachers towards inclusion with particular respect to autistic learners. This research was undertaken in a large further education college in North-East England. The unique insights of the participants are by no means representative of all PGCE student teachers on programmes within my organisation and in no way do I claim these findings can be generalised to other PGCE programmes. In this final chapter, I will discuss the main conclusions, contributions to practice and limitations of the research. Reflections on my own development as a researcher will also be communicated alongside potential future research interests as a result of undertaking this study.

## 6.1 Summary of main conclusions

Four significant conclusions can be drawn from this study.

1. There was no consensus on whether autism should be included within the PGCE curriculum, although the participants who had personal or professional experience of witnessing injustices to autistic people felt strongly that autism should be included on initial teacher education programmes.
2. Participants spoke positively about inclusive practice but some felt unprepared to support autistic learners. Those participants who had taught autistic learners or had other personal or professional experience interacting with autistic people had a positive attitude towards including autistic learners.
3. Time and resources were felt to be major impacting factors on inclusive practice.
4. Support from mentors and peers is important in the development of inclusive practice.

### 6.1.1 PGCE curriculum

Although there was no agreement by the participants on whether autism should feature within the PGCE programme, considering autism as part of the PGCE programme could reduce the inequalities experienced by autistic learners when they are taught by teachers with little or no knowledge of autism. As a minority group not involved in the development or delivery of the ITE programmes, their needs may not be considered from

the outset. Indeed, Tronto (1993:61) argues that 'outsiders are disadvantaged whenever they challenge the views of the predominant groups in society, because the dominant group's views are taken as definitive'. However, the dominant, neurotypical group could learn from the experiences of autistic teachers or guest speakers on the PGCE and this inclusion could improve the experience for everyone. This would also align with UNESCO's Salamanca Statement (1994) which views diversity as ordinary and calls for adjustments to be made to the education system to support the inclusion of all learners.

A critical dimension of the concept of care in education is its potentiality for solidarity and inclusion. This can be partially achieved through ensuring teachers in the post-compulsory sector are appropriately qualified and experienced to confidently include autistic learners. The onus is on teacher educators to take a central role in ensuring ITE programmes address neurodiversity sufficiently in order that the education system becomes more equitable. The more student teachers understand about autism, the more they can affect social justice starting with inclusive practice in their own teaching environments. A caring pedagogy with a focus on inclusion could help to address inequalities of access to education and bring about fairer educational success for autistic learners.

Although it would be unrealistic to consider that a change in teacher knowledge of autism alone would affect change, an approach to ITE based on caring may go some way to improve life chances. Teachers have the power to affect positive change and through their practice they can model inclusive approaches. Teacher educators can facilitate discussion around autism, inclusion, and caring relationships. An exploration of the work of Noddings (1986; 2002; 2005; 2012) and Tronto (1993; 1998; 2013; 2015) on ITE programmes could be an effective way of provoking discussion around inclusion and attitudes towards the diversity of learners. Through utilising the philosophy of care ethics in this way, a conversation can be started around how we can move towards a more socially just society which values and respects neurodiversity.

It is crucial to remember that autism is a lifelong condition. Children grow up to be adults and with that in mind, it is important to enable equity at each life stage. An understanding of how autism might impact on a person's ability to access education and employment should be held by all teachers regardless of whether they work in the compulsory or post-compulsory sector. Tronto (2009) starts from the assumption that in order for human beings to flourish, society needs to be liberal, democratic and pluralistic. This notion of a diverse society, where people can be part of a minority group but still feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to the wider society, could be supported by an

education system that is designed to promote understanding of neurodiversity. The disabling consequences of not making such changes to ITE programmes would fail to support autistic learners to participate in education and society in an equal way to the mainstream majority.

### 6.2.1 Attitudes

My research aligns with the findings of Gregor & Campbell (2001:202) who highlight the two major influences on teacher attitudes with respect to autistic learners are 'confidence that stems from being suitably prepared and supported and direct contact' with an autistic learner. Autistic people have many strengths to contribute to an organisation but if teachers do not understand autism, this can result in learners being excluded from education, employment and society. Therefore, it is paramount that student teachers develop an understanding of autism and acceptance of difference to support more equitable opportunities. Having a diverse student population and a diverse workforce can only benefit the wider community and lead to cohesion in society. Inclusion is the responsibility of all staff, so it is imperative that attitudes towards inclusion are addressed in ITE programmes. Care-conscious education seeks to help students become caring practitioners and could go some way to addressing the issue of inequality.

### 6.2.3 Impacting factors on inclusive practice

This research has highlighted the pressures student teachers in this study who are preparing to teach in the post-compulsory sector feel in relation to time, resources and capability of including autistic learners. Following the financial crash in 2008, the FE sector in England, has 'suffered as a consequence of the government's austerity agenda more than any other education sector' (O'Leary, & Rami, 2017:1) and Orr (2020:508) asserts the Further Education sector 'remains chronically underfunded'. This is despite greater powers of self-governance given since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, which saw FE colleges competing in a free market as they were taken out of local authority control. However, if 'inclusive schools are able to change attitudes to difference by educating all children together' (Ainscow, 2020:2), it is imperative that this inclusive practice continues as learners move into further and higher education. Currently

in England, only 16% of autistic adults are in full time work and this figure has stagnated for over a decade despite more than three quarters of autistic people claiming to want to work (NAS, 2016). The task of an average FE college is broader than that of a school or university and offers mainly vocational qualifications. The FE sector's purpose is to 'prepare students with valuable skills for the workplace, helping to develop their career opportunities and strengthen the local, regional and national economy' (AoC, 2021). People who do not work are viewed as 'lesser citizens' (Tronto, 1993:166) than those who earn an income. Tronto (1993:130) highlights, 'that "others" matter is the most difficult moral quality to establish'. It is important to acknowledge the 'achievement of equality as a political goal' (Tronto, 1993:164) and a care perspective would support this discussion through questioning allocation of resources which means that some citizens have more power than others.

Care involves nurturing to enable a full and fulfilled life where a person is able to reach their capabilities and through expanding capabilities of all people to participate in social life. Over the last forty years, value has been placed on economic prosperity. Gleeson, Hughes, O'Leary & Smith (2015:87) argue 'that marketisation, managerialism and funding centredness have reduced caring in FE'. The growth of the economy has become the priority over the well-being of citizens (Jarret, 2020) and an ethic of care underpinning ITE programmes will only go some way to reduce inequalities and support education for all. A radical overhaul of priorities is required. Instead of the pursuit of profit, an ethic of care could act as a catalyst for change in FE through ensuring equitable access to education. Having needs met is the basis for equality.

Hedge & Mackenzie (2012:193) highlight how

> care continues to feature in the discourses of everyday educational practice and policy with scant attention to its meanings and realisation.

In order for the student teachers to act on a caring need, the organisational structures implemented by management need to demonstrate a caring approach to the teachers and student teachers in order that they themselves have the capacity, the time and the resources to address the needs of all of the learners on their programmes.

### 6.2.4 Support from mentors and peers

Practical guidance and support from mentors were highlighted as valuable to the student teachers' progress in developing inclusive practice. Discussions with peers on the PGCE

programme was also considered to support the development of knowledge through sharing experiences and strategies to support learners. Avramidis *et al*. (2000) highlight the importance of support from others as one of the most considerable influences on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion so this is an area of practice that will be developed. I will discuss how this can be achieved in the following section.

## 6.2 Impact on practice

My purpose of starting the Doctorate in Education was to increase my knowledge in order to inform practice. Although my own ability to impact on wider operational aspects of the organisation, as discussed above, are somewhat limited, there are additions that could be made to practice to facilitate student teachers to develop confidence with supporting autistic learners in the learning environment. There are four clear outcomes from this empirical research study which I will implement to enhance practice in my own organisation. In the following sections I will elaborate on these:

1. The introduction of autistic guest speakers to enhance knowledge of autism and collaboration with autistic people to develop the curriculum.
2. Opportunities to experience and interact with autistic learners through peer observations between and across programmes.
3. Further collaboration with mentors in placement to support their professional development in the area of supporting autistic learners.
4. The development of communities of practice across PGCE pathways and with mentors and teacher educators.

### 6.2.1 Autistic guest speakers

The introduction of autistic guest speakers, as suggested by Robert, could challenge assumptions and clichéd ideas around autism and provide opportunities for student teachers to interact with a range of neurodiverse people. The WHO (2019) support the involvement of people with disabilities as providers of education to improve knowledge and attitudes. Although funding might be a challenge, the introduction of autistic guest speakers could reduce the perpetuation of stereotypical viewpoints. Misconceptions impacting on attitudes towards autistic people can be dispelled through first-hand experience (Kuzminski *et al*., 2019) and establishing opportunities for interaction, suggests

Sharma *et al.* (2008), supports student teachers to include students with disabilities in their classrooms. As Sophie suggested the content on autism was delivered too late in the programme, it would be fruitful to include guest speakers at the start of the first term and then at regular intervals throughout the year to help shape positive attitudes towards autistic learners. As level of contact with learners with disabilities is considered vital in influencing positive attitudes (Florin, Fogarty & Carroll, 1999; Hastings *et al.,* 1996; Rodríguez *et al.,* 2012), this is one way of supporting this connection. The valuable contribution that autistic people could make in sharing their own experiences could highlight the many benefits of a diverse society, including 'innovation, the workforce, and culture' (Mitchell *et al.,* 2021:2) that enriches lives.

Ideally, teaching practice would involve experiencing planning and delivery of groups including autistic learners (Barnhill *et al.*, 2011) but as student teachers on the PGCE in post-compulsory education are often a mixed cohort of pre-service and in-service, the practicalities of organising such experiences are restricted through work timetables. However, what could be arranged without too much disruption is observations of each other's practice and this will be discussed next.

### 6.2.2 Peer observations

In addition to talking and sharing knowledge and ideas, visits to other teachers' classes and observing lessons in a range of contexts could support understanding of theory in practice. Peer observations, a process in which an observer watches another teacher in their practice with the intention of learning about approaches to teaching through the experience, both within and across pathways, could provide opportunities for student teachers to experience a range of different contexts and cohorts of learners. Benefits of peer observations include 'improved teaching practice, increased confidence, and self-reflection' (Hendry, Georgiou, Lloyd, Tzioumis, Herkes & Sharma, 2021:54).

Student teachers on the Young People and Adults pathway, or the English Literacy and ESOL or Maths and Numeracy pathways, could organise visits to the specialist placements of the student teachers on the Learning Difficulties and Disabilities pathway to observe teaching practice. This level of contact with autistic learners, although not direct teaching, could support a more positive attitude to including autistic learners as level of contact with people with disabilities has been emphasised as a key influence in determining positive attitudes towards disability (Florin, Fogarty & Carroll, 1999; Hastings *et al.,* 1996; Rodríguez *et al.,* 2012).

### 6.2.3 Further collaboration with mentors

Inconsistent institutional support from both tutors on programme and mentors in placement does not enable student teachers to develop confidence and positive attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic learners. The responsibility on educational organisations to remove barriers to inclusion must be taken seriously if we have any chance of preventing practices which result in the marginalisation or exclusion of autistic learners. However, in a climate where pressures on teaching staff are immense, changing the cultural norms in education may be difficult to achieve (Ainscow, 2020). Ainscow (2020:8) and the UN General Comment 4 recommend that teachers should be supported in developing inclusive practices through 'an emphasis on whole-school approaches'. This could start with a more joined up approach between teacher educators, mentors, and the student teacher. One way of doing this will to be to utilise technology and use channels in Microsoft Teams, the virtual learning environment adopted by the college this year, to support regular information sharing. This use of technology will support the development of Communities of Practice (CoPs), and this will be discussed in the next section.

### 6.2.4 Communities of practice (CoPs)

Communities of practice are social learning systems formed by people to 'share cultural practices reflecting on their collective learning' (Wenger, 2000:229), the central idea being that all learning is situated. Wenger (2000:229) asserts that through participation in communities of practice we define 'what constitutes competence in a given context'. There are three elements to a community of practice, these are 'mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire' (Culver & Trudel, 2008:3). This joint enterprise in which each member is accountable to the contribution of developing knowledge is built through mutual agreement and is based on a shared understanding of language pertaining to the context specific practice (Wenger, 2000). Members of the community start on the periphery and over time become experts supporting novices in the profession.

The development of a community of practice that involved student teachers, mentors and teacher educators could complement the support from a single mentor and enhance the development of practice through identification of gaps in knowledge and seeking opportunities to address such disparities through collective reflection. The community could support connectivity between practitioners with different specialisms to support the enhancement of others' practice in a mutually beneficial way. For example, student

teachers on the learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) pathway could share their knowledge and experiences of teaching autistic learners with student teachers on other pathways, and also with mentors and teacher educators who do not have that specialist knowledge. This shared practice and co-construction of knowledge could lead to a richer experience and deeper knowledge of the diversity of learners and has the potential to contribute to more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic learners. If, according to Wenger (2000:239), we 'define ourselves by what we are not as well as by what we are' then the distinct divide between specialist teachers for learners with SEND and general teachers might decrease through this sharing of practice and lead to teachers graduating from the PGCE with a stronger self of self-efficacy and belief in their own ability to include autistic learners in the learning environment. As teachers' beliefs is a powerful factor influencing decisions in the classroom (Abukari, 2014; Mulholland and Cumming, 2016; WHO, 2019), this addition could support the inclusion of autistic learners and ultimately help to reduce the numbers of exclusions of learners on the autism spectrum.

The active participation in communities of practice support the construction of identity in relation to the community (Culver & Trudel, 2008). In a culture that stresses 'an unlimited concern with productivity and progress' (Tronto, 2009:2), it is important to bring to the fore of ITE programmes the necessity of human interconnectivity and the values of attentiveness and compassion for others. This will support student teachers to feel cared for and in turn, is likely to foster a caring attitude in their own practice.

### 6.3 Limitations of the study

The timing of the research had an impact on the study. The global pandemic interrupted this study and impacted on the number of participants I initially intended to recruit. At the time of starting to conduct face-to-face interviews, England went into a national lockdown and there was significant disruption to everyone's lives. At this point, I had twice sent out, via my colleagues, invitations to participate in the study. Having recruited ten participants, I asked colleagues to send out one final invitation but was also aware of the increased stress, pressure and anxiety felt by everyone at this time and with care ethics underpinning my research design, I felt I could not continue to request more from people's time.

Although this study did not intend to be representative of all student teachers on the PGCE programmes within my organisation, an increase in the sample number and a more diverse representation of student teachers across the pathways would have been advantageous. As far as possible, I had hoped to include views from participants on all of the PGCE pathways offered in my organisation and this was achieved although the sample was small. One other limitation of this study is that as student teachers were self-selecting participants, it is likely that those with an interest in inclusion and autism would come forward whilst those student teachers who lacked interest in inclusive education of autistic students might not offer to participate in the research.

A further drawback of this research was that I was only able to gain a snapshot of the participants' experiences through their own eyes and whilst this is valid data, perhaps one way of enhancing these findings and triangulating the data, would have been to include observational data of both taught PGCE sessions and of student teachers' practice in the classroom over a period of time. This longitudinal approach would enable a deeper exploration into the phenomenon and support a more comprehensive understanding. Scrutiny of course materials, schemes of work, and examples of student teachers' work, alongside observations of taught lessons and feedback on teaching practice, could provide a broader picture. In addition, the focus on student and recent graduates' perspectives in this study limits the breadth of potential understanding. Further research might include the perspectives of graduates from previous years, teachers who have been in post for longer than a year, teacher educators and other stakeholders, for example managers, employers and autistic learners and teachers to provide a more holistic representation. Other examples of possible future research areas will conclude this chapter.

### 6.4 Future research recommendations

A key aspect of the research process when conducting research about how to improve the lives of autistic people is to include and engage with the autistic community and their allies. Throughout this research, I have drawn on first-hand accounts of published autistic authors and was privileged to have an autistic student teacher take part in my own study who was able to provide insightful accounts and make suggestions for future practice. The incorporation of autistic perspectives is crucial and encapsulated by the disability rights movement 'Nothing About Us Without Us' (Dyck & Russell, 2020). An important goal for the future is to ensure collaboration from the autistic community in co-creating policy and

curriculum design in ITE. For education and inclusion of autistic people to progress, researchers must be 'truly participatory with those they seek to produce knowledge about' (Milton and Moon, 2012:6). The translation of this research into practice that benefits the autistic community through the training and development of student teachers is paramount.

Walker & Gleaves (2016) discuss caring pedagogies in higher education and highlight the scarce amount of research into caring teachers in the post-compulsory sector. Indeed, Hayes (Hayes, Marshall & Turner, 2007:185) highlights the 'minimal engagement with research' of professionals in the FE sector and reflects on the precariousness of continuing professional development in this sector. Care pedagogies and their potential to effect change to support inclusion in the post-compulsory sector is worthy of further exploration. How beliefs in a caring approach to teacher development are enacted in practice could be further explored.

This study provides an essential foundation for further exploration of the inclusion of autistic learners in post-compulsory initial teacher education programmes. An insight into student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic learners has supported reflection on practice and resulted in clear outcomes to develop the PGCE programme. Future studies would benefit from the inclusion of other stakeholders' perspectives, for example, mentors and teacher educators within the department. Building on this research, as significant variations in support from mentors on placement in relation to teaching autistic learners was highlighted by the participants, this is an area that would warrant further exploration.

My own journey through this research process has supported my growth as both a researcher and a practitioner. This research will be disseminated within and beyond the organisation I work for through conferences and written publications. Since starting this project, I have also been invited to be part of a working group to develop inclusive practice within the organisation and hope this makes real changes to outcomes for learners.

The purpose of further education (FE) is to meet the needs of the communities it serves in addition to the economic and skills driven demands (Gleeson *et al.*, 2015). Responsive action to the community requires consideration for all citizens and that includes autistic people. An ethics of care approach to education draws attention to the importance of relationships, belonging, and interdependency, which embedded in teachers' practice,

could enhance the inclusion of all learners. Kindness, attentiveness and proactive attitudes are all qualities associated with ethics of care and through care-conscious education, student teachers could be supported to become caring practitioners with the confidence to include all learners.

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Appendix A: Ethical Approval


14 November 2019

Dear Lisa Fernandes

**College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee**

**Project Title:** What are student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards inclusion with particular respect to autistic learners?

**Application No:** 400190039

The College Research Ethics Committee has reviewed your application and has agreed that there is no objection on ethical grounds to the proposed study. It is happy therefore to approve the project, subject to the following conditions:

- Start date of ethical approval: 09/12/2019
- Project end date: 21/09/2022
- Any outstanding permissions needed from third parties in order to recruit research participants or to access facilities or venues for research purposes must be obtained in writing and submitted to the CoSS Research Ethics Administrator before research commences. Permissions you must provide are shown in the *College Ethics Review Feedback* document that has been sent to you as the Collated Comments Document in the online system.
- The data should be held securely for a period of ten years after the completion of the research project, or for longer if specified by the research funder or sponsor, in accordance with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research: (https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_490311_en.pdf)
- The research should be carried out only on the sites, and/or with the groups and using the methods defined in the application.
- Any proposed changes in the protocol should be submitted for reassessment as an amendment to the original application. The *Request for Amendments to an Approved Application* form should be used:
  https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/staffandpostgraduateresearchstudents/

Yours sincerely,

Dr Muir Houston

College Ethics Officer

Appendix B: Plain Language Statement

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

**Plain Language Statement**

**Title of Project:** What are student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards inclusion with particular respect to autistic learners?

**Name of Researcher:** Lisa Fernandes

**Contact Details:**l.fernandes.1@research.gla.ac.uk

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

**The purpose of the study**

This research is part of my Doctorate in Education at the University of Glasgow. This project is a small-scale investigation into student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards inclusion with particular respect to autistic learners. The research is proposed for my workplace, an NCG division, Newcastle College.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been invited because you are studying for a PGCE at Newcastle College or you have recently completed your studies on the PGCE at Newcastle College. Your views and experiences whilst studying for a PGCE will help the researcher to understand from a student teacher's perspective understandings of inclusion and autism, attitudes towards including autistic learners, experiences of including autistic learners, and opinions on how the PGCE has prepared you to support autistic learners. Involvement in the research project may support reflection of own attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic learners and lead to learning and growth as a practitioner.

**Do I have to take part?**

No, your participation is entirely voluntary and will in no way impact on your relationship with your tutor, your programme or assessment. If you decide to take part, you can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to provide an explanation. If at any point you no longer wish to take part, then please let me know. There is no obligation on

you to continue, nor any penalty for withdrawing. You can ask for your related data (recordings, my notes) to be destroyed and all references to it removed at any time before 2nd October 2020.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

You will be asked to sign a consent form and then take part in an interview which will usually last between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews will be audio- recorded. If you would like to participate but do not wish for your interview to be recorded, please let me know.

You have full protection via the Data Protection Act (2018). Audio recordings will be transferred and stored on my password protected, file encrypted, personal PC and deleted from the transportable media. In the meantime, I will ensure the portable device is kept securely until the data is deleted. The data will be transcribed by the researcher and then the audio recording will be destroyed. Your name and any other identifying information will be removed and replaced with a pseudonym in the transcript.

You can request to view the transcript, or listen to the audio at the end of the interview, and any parts you are unhappy with will be deleted and disregarded from the data. Recordings will only be accessed by the researcher.

With your consent, the research data, meaning the researcher's notes and anonymised transcripts will be securely stored for ten years in accordance with Glasgow University's requirements. No participant names will be kept with the data.

You have the right to request your research data is destroyed at any time before 2nd October 2020.

**Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

Every effort will be made to preserve confidentiality, however, due to size of sample and particular location confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

Data may be used in the research report and potentially in academic articles or conference presentations. If your data is used, it will not identify you in any way. A pseudonym will protect your identity in the research report and any identifying information about you will be removed from the report. A summary of results will be made available to participants.

**Contact for Further Information**

Lisa Fernandes:l.fernandes.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Ines Alves (supervisor): ines.alves@glasgow.ac.uk

**If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, you can contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer Dr Muir Houston email:socsciethics@glasgow.ac.uk**

Appendix C: Consent Form

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences

**Consent Form**

**Title of Project:** What are student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards inclusion with particular respect to autistic learners?

**Name of Researcher:** Lisa Fernandes; Supervisor: Dr Ines Alves

☐I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement/Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

☐I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

☐I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym in any publications arising from the research.

☐I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my relationship with my tutor or my studies arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

☐I consent to this interview being audio-recorded.

☐I do not consent to this interview being audio-recorded.

☐I consent for anonymised transcripts to be archived.

☐I do not consent for anonymised transcripts to be archived.

☐I agree to take part in this research study.

☐I do not agree to take part in this research study.

Name of Participant ……. Signature ……..

Date: …….

Name of Researcher …… Signature ……

Date ……

## Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. Just tell me first of all why you decided to do a PGCE.
2. What subject do you teach?
3. During your PGCE, did you develop an understanding of inclusion? If so, can you explain what this means to you?
4. When you think of autism, what comes to your mind?
5. Prior to starting your PGCE, did you have a knowledge of autism?
6. During your PGCE, did you develop your knowledge of autism?
7. During your PGCE, did you get the opportunity to work with learners on the autistic spectrum?
8. Could you discuss your experiences of teaching autistic learners?
9. During your PGCE do you remember receiving any guidance about how to include autistic learners?
10. During your PGCE did you feel supported to include autistic learners?
11. Do you feel the PGCE prepared you effectively to work with learners on the autistic spectrum?
12. Is there anything that concerns you about having autistic learners in your classroom?
13. Do you think it is important to consider autism as part of the PGCE programme?
14. What advice would you give to someone who's just starting their PGCE with regards to inclusion of autistic learners?
15. If you could change the PGCE programme with regards to autism, what would you change?
16. Is there anything else you would like to say that we have not covered?

Probing questions, for example, 'Can you tell me more?' and 'Can you give me an example?' may be used.

# Appendix E: Extract of coded interview from NVivo