Towards Better Support for High-Functioning Autistic Learners in a Mainstream Sixth Form Classroom.

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Abstract:

This conceptual Dissertation emerged from my personal professional experiences as the Head of Additional Learning Support and Inclusion at a London Sixth Form College. The study considers the ways in which support for 16 to 19-year-old autistic learners who are deemed as high functioning might be improved. Initially I analyse current educational policy and legislation, using Martha Nussbaum's version of the Capabilities Approach as an analytical lens. I argue that an education system based on a commodified, meritocratic, standardised, and neoliberal understanding of success has had a detrimental impact on both the flourishing and working relationships of high-functioning autistic learners and their teachers in the classroom. I contend that this type of education system focuses on employability skills using narrow understandings of human flourishing and what it means to be human. I suggest that Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach offers an alternative value system based on the recognition of human dignity and a broader and deeper understanding of what it means to be human by acknowledging and embracing different ways of thinking and being. I then discuss the difficulties high-functioning autistic learners encounter with social communication and functioning and feeling misunderstood which, I argue, are compounded by the pressures caused by the current meritocratic commodified education system. Additionally, and following Nussbaum's work on emotions, I argue that key to the improvement of the understanding and support of high-functioning autistic learners in the classroom is a dialogical, empathetic, and compassionate working relationship between the teacher and the learner, both of whom are on a mutual learning journey. I then discuss how this relationship can be enhanced with the values of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach practically implemented using Armstrong's Positive Niche Construction. I contend, in my conclusion, that this approach to education will benefit not only high functioning autistic learners but all learners.

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Author's declaration

"I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, 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."

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Chapter One: Introduction: the current situation and reason for this study

The writing of this Dissertation was motivated by a wish to provide better support for 16 to 19-year-old learners at a mainstream London Sixth Form College who have been diagnosed with high-functioning autism. In this introductory chapter I initially outline the three main concerns that motivated me to write this Dissertation; explain my working context; offer a definition of high-functioning autism, which will be expanded in Chapter Two and provide a chapter outline detailing in more depth the concerns outlined at the beginning of this chapter. The chapter outline will include a brief justification for the use of the Capabilities Approach as an analytical lens for the Dissertation and will conclude with an explanation of the terms and language used in this study.

The following three main concerns that prevent such learners from flourishing arose from my professional experience at the college as Head of Additional Learning Support and Inclusion. These concerns are that:

1. the current neoliberal agenda of a standardised, meritocratic and employability driven education system creates a tension-laden classroom and pressurised learning environment defined by economic imperatives
2. the nature of high-functioning autism is often misunderstood
3. the importance of emotions to learning and to understanding autism are consequently undervalued because of the pressures that high-functioning autistic learners and teachers face in the classroom.

At the college, high-functioning autistic learners receive support within their mainstream classroom through the subject teacher and an in-class support Learning Support Assistant

(LSA) and via specialist teacher support on an individual basis. The sixth form college timetable differs from a traditional school timetable in that lessons do not take place throughout the day. There are free hours in between subject lessons and individual specialist support sessions are held during these free times rather than removing the learner from the classroom. This is to make support discreet while ensuring that the learner has full access to the curriculum. These support sessions take place in the Additional Learning Support (ALS) room that has been co-designed by the learners themselves to give them some control over their learning environment. This autonomy is also developed through the working relationship of trust between the learner and the teacher, which, I will argue, is fundamental to successful support.

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2021), a person with high-functioning autism may be defined as someone who experiences difficulties with social, emotional and communication skills that are sufficient to merit an official diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, formerly referred to as Asperger's Syndrome. Wide ranging in nature, individuals typically have difficulty with understanding their own and others' emotions, social norms and concepts, and they may act impulsively, have difficulty communicating their thoughts, wishes and needs, and may experience difficulty empathizing. Additionally, autistic learners may become overwhelmed by their senses. In its broadest sense, according to Rudy (2021), someone with high-functioning autism may be someone who has an IQ higher than 70, who can relatively independently navigate a general mainstream school, college or working environment, and who can conceal difficulties such as communication and social functioning successfully enough to be able to pass as non-autistic. Wood (2019) suggests that medical definitions of autism such as the one described above with its focus on symptoms and difficulties, arguably accounts for the underpinning understanding of autism internationally

across organisations and institutions. If this is the case, there is a danger that the strengths of high-functioning autistic people may be overlooked. It is this danger, together with the need to conceal difficulties in order to conform to social norms, that is of central concern in this Dissertation and this will be addressed in the detailed outline of my three main concerns in my working context to which I now turn.

The first major concern motivating this study emerged from observations in my work and discussion with colleagues at other educational institutions. This concern is that the current neoliberal agenda of a standardised and commodified education system creates a pressurised classroom environment that is meritocratic in nature and driven by results and accountability. This is the focus of Chapter Three where I will argue that these factors compound the difficulties and anxieties experienced in the classroom, by placing teachers and learners under what I regard as unnecessary pressure to perform academically and it occasions a focus on grades and away from educational working relationships. Sandel (2020) claims that merit is often determined by fortune or misfortune. Talent and the capacity for determined effort may depend on a range of factors, including upbringing, and this might provide more learning opportunities for a child born into a prosperous family than for someone born into poverty. Moreover Sandel (2020) also argues that meritocracy is presented conceptually and morally as the antithesis of hereditary privilege in which an individual's social position is determined by the lottery of birth. However, the idea that income, power, jobs and even university admission should be determined by individual skill and effort is based upon the assumption that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed whereas, in practice, it is clear that everyone does not start from an equal position.

Bourdieu (1977) defines the social structure in which an individual lives, and which affects how their inner self is shaped, as 'habitus' which is the way in which a group is structured, or an individual is shaped, by past and present circumstances such as family upbringing and educational experiences. Furthermore, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) maintain that these influences help shape an individual's present and future disposition, perceptions and practices which inform a person's choices in life.

> … on one side it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus … on the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction. Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:127)

If an individual's past experiences are limited, this may have a limiting effect on the way a person views the world, the opportunities s/he can anticipate and her/his own potential, and so every individual may not have equitable opportunities to succeed. Many of the learners that I teach live in overcrowded housing, come from marginalised ethnic groups, and live with very few resources. Some learners live on notorious South London estates and are vulnerable to gang recruitment or being coerced into criminal activity. In my position at the college, I have to be constantly aware of this inequality and ensure that my approach to support and teaching encompasses the learner's safety and well-being, articulates and builds from their strengths, raises their self-esteem and provides learning opportunities that they may not otherwise have.

The effects of inequality in the education system on the support for high-functioning autistic learners are all too easily observable at the college. In Chapter Three, I will argue that one of the factors of inequality is that the current meritocratic and standardised approach to education promotes behaviour and functioning that is deemed acceptable by society as learners are streamed according to so-called ability measured against standardised outcomes for expected age groups, implying that learners are intelligent or unintelligent. Furthermore,

Hutchings (2015) argues that teachers and learning institutions are to be accountable with respect, mainly, to learner academic attainment. A focus on academic achievement and employability skills may recognise only those who have a good memory and will do well in exams. In 2015, Nicky Morgan, the former Secretary of State for Education stated:

> We will expect every pupil by the age of 11 to know their times tables off by heart, to perform long division and complex multiplication and to be able to read a novel. (Morgan, 2015)

Of course, human beings develop at different rates and in different ways, but Morgan's statement ignores this and thereby potentially dismisses intelligent learners with working memory and processing difficulties, characteristics that a diverse range of learners such as high-functioning autistic learners, learners with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD – dyspraxia), dyslexia or co-occurring difficulties, may have. By measuring high-functioning autistic learners against such criteria erroneous assumptions can easily be made about them. They may be predicted to fail and teachers, by focusing on academic grades, might not get to know and value their learners and their strengths and may not understand their needs and their ways of navigating the world. High-functioning autistic learners are then marginalised and excluded, and their innate intelligence and ability to think creatively and divergently are overlooked. Moreover, adding to this already pressurised environment, the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) legislation and the educational model of inclusion in schools and colleges in England that conforms with this neoliberal value system can discriminate against a high-functioning autistic individual rather than provide her/him with an equitable starting point to her/his education.

My own professional observations suggest this may be because policy makers define what it means to be a human being according to economic and utilitarian values. According to Castro

and Palikara (2016) current SEND legislation is based to a certain extent on a biopsychosocial model of understanding disability which, according to Engel (1977; 1980), considers that interactions between biological, psychological, and social factors determine the cause, manifestation and outcome of a disability or difference. I will argue that although the legislation should reflect this view, it actually reflects a medical model of disability, viewing autism as a deficit of the human condition rather than an alternative way of thinking and being. Viewing autism solely as a medical condition to be cured or managed alludes to a type of socially acceptable standardised definition of human functioning and a striving for a certain sort of human perfection defined by the norms created by those in power in society. Goodley (2014) terms this an ableist view of humanity. This implies that people who do not fit into this specific definition of a human being and human functioning are somehow less than human, bringing into question the meaning of personhood and what it means to be human and this is developed in Chapter Two. Having only one definition of what it means to be human dismisses the idea that other ways of thinking and being are just as valid and means that individuals who think in a different way may be marginalised. Moreover, there is a danger of ignoring the possible unique ideas and contributions that autistic people and people with other conditions offer.

My second major concern is that a high-functioning autistic learner may be misjudged and unappreciated because of the way that s/he communicates and functions, both socially and emotionally. This can lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety and low self-esteem. Obvious externally observable signs of autism may not be present. Nearly all of the learners that I have taught suffer from anxiety, which may become suddenly intense and overwhelming. This is often reflected in the way that they react to a given situation, which may include walking out of class, shouting, hitting, becoming completely withdrawn or catatonic or

stimming which, for example, might be rocking backwards and forwards. These reactions are often known as ‘meltdowns.’ When the high-functioning autistic learners with whom I work react to distress in ‘fight or flight’ mode their behaviour may be deemed unacceptable and disruptive as they are judged by societal parameters of commonly acceptable social behaviour. Yet, until this happens, their anxiety, communication and social difficulties often go undetected. Because the high-functioning autistic learners with whom I work are often high achieving academically, they are also frequently presumed to be high-functioning emotionally and socially in a way that is deemed to be acceptable by the society that they live in. Their teachers often assume that the learners process emotional and social signals, body language, verbal and non-verbal information and inference in the same way and at the same speed as they successfully process written academic information. Any difference in the way that a high-functioning autistic learner may communicate or function socially and emotionally is then often deemed to be ‘odd’ or ‘eccentric’ by non-autistic people. This may make the high-functioning autistic learner feel like an outsider in the classroom or college environment.

This means that high-functioning autism is frequently referred to as a ‘hidden’ or ‘discreet’ disability, as it may not be obvious to others interacting with the high-functioning autistic individual. According to the Invisible Disabilities Association (2020), a hidden disability may be defined by symptoms such as debilitating pain, cognitive dysfunction, brain injury, learning differences and mental health disorders as well as sensory impairments. The difficulties experienced by each individual vary and may not be obvious to an observer, but can limit daily activities, ranging from mild challenges to severe limitations. Unfortunately, people may assume that a person is capable or not capable of doing something based only on a judgement of external appearances.

Moreover, according to the World Health Organization (2021), high-functioning autistic people are often subject to stigma, discrimination and human rights violations. This judgemental attitude can be frustrating for those who might either appear physically capable but face internal barriers to everyday functioning or are capable but appear to be presented with physical barriers to everyday life. Having a hidden disability, myself, I have observed that much of this stigma and discrimination has its roots in a lack of understanding of the nature of hidden disabilities, in this instance autism. This, I will contend, may have its foundation in prejudicial attitudes caused by making assumptions and judgements based on socially accepted norms the people making the judgement may or may not be consciously aware of and this is a focus of Chapter Four.

In my experience, and according to O'Brien (2016), groups with hidden disabilities are large and diverse, but are invisible. Because the difficulties experienced cannot be seen, the recognition of both an individual's strengths and her/his needs are made invisible. I have heard comments such as 'stop trying to pathologize poor behaviour, he's not high-functioning autistic, he hasn't been taught how to behave by his parents', implying poor parenting skills, or 'there is no excuse for bad behaviour, disability or no disability'. Such remarks are damaging because not only do they dismiss both the strengths and needs of high-functioning autistic learners, but learner ambitions and potential can be undermined by low expectations of achievement on the part of both the teacher and the learner. This, in turn, may have a detrimental effect on self-esteem and often results in withdrawn behaviour or behaviour that is perceived as disruptive. In this Dissertation, I will argue that behaviour that is perceived as negative often conveys an unmet need: a reaction to a situation and an attempt to

communicate. This does not excuse such behaviour but may well be an explanation for it and is also relevant to my second concern: that high-functioning autism is often misunderstood.

I have observed that misunderstanding may in part be fuelled by teachers and learners expecting different outcomes from an interaction. For example, the learner wishes to be heard and reassured and have his/her anxiety understood by the teacher, while the teacher expects the learner to follow instructions and adhere to the often-unspoken social conventions that the teacher assumes the learner understands. Many times, I have observed a misunderstanding or miscommunication in classroom interactions between the high-functioning autistic learner and the teacher. For instance, some high-functioning autistic learners report feeling overwhelmed by teachers talking to them in a way that they perceive as angry whereas the teachers say they are merely talking passionately about their subject. The autistic learner may misread facial and body language and voice volume and tone resulting in a misconception of events happening in the classroom. Similarly, the teacher may misinterpret the learner's facial expression, body language and tone of voice. The situation may be aggravated by other factors such as a sensory overload which could include reacting to the brightness of the lights in the room, the colours of posters on walls, the weather outside, or background noise. These features of behaviour are considered in Chapters Two and Four and, because of them, some learners are unable to process anything the teacher says and simply nod in what appears to the teacher to be agreement. Learners say that such scenarios make them feel extremely frustrated and anxious because they cannot get their point across to the teacher, and when the teacher later asks them why they seemed to agree and understand but had not adhered to the instructions, the learners cannot explain and are consequently reprimanded for failing to follow those instructions. In such situations, many high-functioning autistic learners with whom I work say that they feel that their teachers do not listen to them and they assume that

the teachers judge them to be bad people. Why else, they ask, would they have been asked to leave the classroom? My concern is that because of the assumptions and expectations described above, the teacher ignores the important factor of neurological difference. Teachers may not consider the learner as a unique and diversely thinking individual with a different perspective and behaviours from their own.

My third concern is that a tension-laden classroom driven by economic imperatives, focusing on academic achievement and employability skills, such as is common in England today, tends to dismiss or undervalue the importance of the emotions. Day *et al*. (2006) suggest that an education system that focuses predominantly on academic achievement and employability skills has, it seems, led to an emotional disconnection between the teacher and the learner, having a detrimental impact on teacher-learner relationships. Goodley (2014) highlights the importance of such human relationships within a person's development claiming that:

> … we have to re-find those moments of alliance, connections and interdependence that are at the heart of what it means to be human. (Goodley, 2014:156)

There is a danger then that emotions, social and communication skills, and relationships with others, which I shall argue in Chapter Five are all crucial to the education and flourishing of the individual, are ignored or at least under-valued, particularly because they are intangible and cannot be easily measured empirically.

I have observed some excellent collaboration between high-functioning autistic learners and classroom teachers at the college where I work and often it is the case that the teacher has a very strong working relationship of trust with the learner and both learn from each other. However, some learners report that they are made to feel outsiders by their teachers and so they lack confidence and they are convinced that they cannot trust anyone. Moreover, it is

apparent that the high-functioning autistic learners and their teachers often view the same situation from different perspectives, each making assumptions about the other. When the high-functioning autistic learners react in an emotional way that the teachers do not expect, for example by shouting or refusing to co-operate for no apparent reason, teachers often react in a surprised and negative way. It does not seem to occur to some teachers that their learners may react this way because of a heightened state of confusion and anxiety. Such episodes of miscommunication may cause confrontations between learner and subject teacher resulting in sanctions and punishment, such as exclusion from class, further isolating high-functioning autistic learners from both their peers and their teacher.

Furthermore, there appears to be an emotional disconnect between some teachers and learners. It is as if the teacher and the learner cannot see each other and cannot see the valuable learning opportunities that each could provide for the other. Moreover, some learners have reported that they feel that they cannot connect with other people on either a communicative or an emotional level because they fear being taken advantage of by others. They talk of negative experiences in the past, of being let down by others, and so they find it hard to trust anyone. This can result in them feeling vulnerable and lacking in confidence. It may also increase the feeling of being an outsider or 'other' and such social isolation, because of feeling misunderstood, is the focus of Chapter Four. I will also argue that for high-functioning autistic learners who may find the classroom confusing and anxiety-inducing on sensory, psychological, and communicative levels, feelings of social isolation may make them feel as if their situation is hopeless as they may feel that no one understands. Runswick-Cole *et al*. (2016) contend that the complexities of social situations, stemming from emotions, assumptions and expectations on the part of both the learner and the teacher, may contribute to confusion and social anxiety for high-functioning autistic learners. This

may result in low self-esteem for the learner, falling grades, confrontational situations in the classroom, and social isolation. Yet Labaree (2000:229) claims that establishing and building genuine trustworthy relationships between teachers and learners is pivotal for the capacity to learn. This is particularly important for high-functioning autistic learners as the world is often a confusing and complex place of social and emotional subtexts and contradictions. In this Dissertation, I will maintain that having people available to help such learners navigate the world successfully and independently is key to their flourishing and I shall discuss this in greater depth in Chapters Four and Five.

I will argue that the emotions are central to self-esteem and flourishing in Chapter Five and that they are a fundamental part of the human condition, connecting individuals and communities in teaching and learning. This is especially important in the current climate of intermittent lockdown and social restrictions because of the COVID-19 crisis. I have observed that lockdown, when an individual is required to remain at home to quarantine and socially isolate, has had a detrimental psychological effect on learners who became progressively more socially isolated. In my own working context, many parents and guardians reported to me that learners were locking themselves in their rooms and withdrawing into their own virtual worlds, some for over fourteen hours a day. Here they may feel safe but are vulnerable to unscrupulous people on the internet and social media as well as gaming addiction. Some parents have also reported that their child is no longer entering into meaningful dialogue with them, and they are distracted when they do speak to them. I have also observed a rapid decline in learners' mental well-being, many of them anxious and depressed not only because they were out of routine but, from their reactions and behaviour it was evident that they were afraid of an unprecedented, unpredictable, and uncertain situation which included feeling cut off from the world. Similar findings have been

reported in recent studies with, for example, Capp *et al*. (2021) documenting the negative impact of lockdown on the mental health and well-being of autistic learners.

In Chapter Five I will argue that it is often in spontaneous moments when empathy and compassion may be shared and that communication through body language and the intuitive elements of learner-teacher interaction cannot be replicated through a computer in a virtual meeting. Bailenson (2021) argues that when a person interacts with another through a computer on a meeting platform, such as Zoom, much non-verbal communication is missed, misinterpreted or becomes overwhelming. This, Bailenson (2021) suggests, is because individuals are forced to experience excessive amounts of close-up eye gaze, cognitive overload, and increased self-evaluation from constantly seeing oneself on camera, in addition to constraints on physical mobility. He argues that users are forced to consciously monitor nonverbal behaviour and to send cues to others that are intentionally generated. On the other hand, non-verbal cues are present and perceived by other conversationalists but may not convey the intention of the person making the gestures. Moreover, emotions precede and follow non-verbal and verbal behaviours which influence decision making and responses and so play a pivotal role in communication. In the non-virtual world, nonverbal and verbal cues are often subconsciously generated within the context of the surrounding environment, making it easier for authentic communication to take place. Similarly, Walker (2020) argues that the physical environment acts as a cognitive scaffold, which can subtly change behaviours and emotions felt indicating that both therapists and their patients also often feel fatigued, disaffected, and uncomfortable in discussions held over a computer because this cognitive scaffolding is missing. Walker (2020) further suggests that so-called synchronous learning via a computer is not really synchronous because there is a real-time lag of a milli-second that can trigger the brain to search for ways to overcome the lack of synchronicity.

Having returned to college after the first wave of the pandemic, learner mental health quickly revived, although both learner and parental anxiety about the new social distancing measures were evident. In contrast to the social isolation under lockdown, during the normal college day there are opportunities for spontaneous interaction between learners and with teachers in the corridors and at break times. In this Dissertation, I will suggest that these spontaneous and often emotional interactions are important in that they are the glue that cements the relationship between the learner and the teacher. I will also contend that the emotions of empathy and compassion can improve cognizance of the autistic mind, and that it is through these emotions that relationships of mutual understanding, respect, trust and learning between people can develop. Moreover, I shall suggest that it is through these relationships that a better acceptance of diverse ways of thinking and being can be promoted in the classroom, providing opportunities to facilitate learning experiences to each individual as part of a larger classroom community and so providing inclusion and enhancing the rich dynamic of the learning environment. Furthermore, I will argue that teachers should come to know their learners well enough to be able to understand their unique ways of communicating and that learner anxiety might be alleviated by helping learners feel that they can trust the teacher. I will discuss how the complementary nature of a positive teacher-learner relationship may improve communication in the classroom by generating emotionally connected working relationships based on trust and the emotions of empathy and compassion. The exploration of these ideas is at the core of this Dissertation and is addressed throughout the chapters which follow, and the arguments that support them are to be found mainly in Chapter Five. However, I will first discuss my positionality in order to contextualise this Dissertation.

Positionality

When I first chose to do a conceptual Dissertation as a professional practitioner in the field, I focused on the three problems that had arisen within the education system with respect to the full inclusion of high-functioning autistic learners. My aim was to highlight to others, and to better understand for myself, the difficulties these students had described to me first hand but it had not occurred to me that my own experience of being dyspraxic would be instrumental in the analysis and writing of this Dissertation.

When I was diagnosed with Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD), the official diagnostic term for Dyspraxia, I needed to emotionally come to terms with my diagnosis. Although my initial reaction was one of relief, as I had always felt that I was different from other people and others had always made comments that suggested they also felt this, I was hesitant to tell anyone as I felt ashamed, but I could not understand why. This made me reflect on how, as a practitioner I had not adequately questioned the labelling of students through diagnosis via medical manuals and medical authorities or thought enough about the emotional effects diagnoses might have on a learner's self-image and the assumptions people may make about them. Sometimes learners ask me to explain to them psychological and neurological theories about autism so that they might better understand themselves. Being 16-20 years of age, the students with whom I work are in the midst of forming their adult identity and becoming autonomous and so these conversations felt important. This then made me reflect on the language that I use with them to describe autism. I found that my diagnosis of dyspraxia actually brought me closer to the learners through the mutual experience of having a diagnosis. Whereas I had considered myself to be a carer with a responsibility to provide an opportunity for learners to discover themselves in relation to the society in which

they are living, after my diagnosis I found that I was going through a similar process of discovery about who I was and about my self-image and the students were caring for me. In this respect we were all socially vulnerable and interdependent as human beings. This was demonstrated when, after I had declared my diagnosis, some people both within professional and personal contexts many of whom had known me for years, spoke to me as if I was unintelligent or rolled their eyes. I was still the same person who had successfully led a department through three Ofsted inspections obtaining an outstanding grade each time, I was the same person who had won practitioner awards, who mentors trainee and newly qualified teachers and Special Educational Needs and Disability Co-ordinators (SENDCos) who are new to post, I was still the same person who people came to for advice and to problem-solve. Yet somehow reactions towards me had changed and, I felt I was met with looks of confusion, of mistrust and sometimes disdain. This did not make me feel angry, but ashamed for getting my words mixed up or for forgetting them and it made me self-conscious about the movement of my hands as I talk. I then became frustrated at the realisation that I have a right to articulate ideas with my hands when I talk if I need to or want to do so. This is not unprofessional: it is just different and suggested to me that society has a very narrow view of what it means to be human. Suddenly, the theory that I had been reading and relating to learners became very real for me and, through this experience, I began to much better to understand some of the experiences of autistic learners. It is important to say that not everyone treated me this way. The majority of people wanted to support and understand me, but even some of those people patronised me. This gave my working relationship with the autistic learners I teach another dimension. I had a connection with them that I had not had before as I was experiencing first-hand what it feels like to be labelled. I had always thought that I never had a 'them and us' attitude, but, having undergone this experience, I realized that I actually had just that attitude.

I discussed my experiences at length with the learners and they reflected back to me what I had always told them but never really understood myself until I had this encounter: I should celebrate who I am. I found myself thinking back to my childhood. I was always losing things, putting my clothes on upside down, and inside out, being laughed at for not being able to walk in a straight line along the pavement, or being nagged for starting a task and getting side-tracked, for feeling and being impulsive, for feeling excruciating panic when I could not find something I needed in my bag for fear I had dropped it along the way to school. I remembered how I would say the wrong thing to people when in my head I had meant to say the opposite or ignore people because I had not processed that they were talking to me, then feeling ashamed and anxious at any social gathering. My learners told me that had I not been born the way I had been born, if I was not who I am, I would not be the empathiser who always tries to relate to others as if she were in their shoes. They would not have someone who advocates for them in such a strong way, with such a strong voice. I would not be the creative and divergent thinker, the problem solver, the person who never gives up. I realised that, over the years, I had developed a perfectionist attitude to compensate for focusing on myself in a critical and negative way due to my early life experiences which had, at least partially, been brought about by people misunderstanding me and by my misunderstanding of myself and others.

My learners taught me to celebrate who I am and it is only through the writing of this Dissertation and in discussion with them and participating in this doctorate that I have come to the realisation that teachers and learners are on a continuum. They are not working in parallel on separate trajectories, but are connected in their humanity and their experiences, one teaching the other in ways akin to Freire's (1970) concept of learners as teachers and

teachers as learners. This realisation and connection with the learners I teach, informed my way of knowing and producing conceptual analysis because I was experiencing, first-hand the feelings and thoughts they were describing to me and about which I was reading and writing. Through this dialogical relationship, our journeys of knowledge and self-realisation were intertwined and this brought to mind Fletcher-Watson et al.'s (2019) assertion that researchers and autistic learners can be allies or co-creators of knowledge in research.

Of course, as we are all unique, I will not have the exact same disposition or perception of life, and I may not experience the same difficulties or frustrations as any other individual. Moreover, I am 30 years older than the learners with whom I work and so am further along the path of life experience and see the world through a different lens in that respect. Also, as a teacher of 25 years in a managerial position at an inner-London sixth form college, I have a different status at the college from the learners. Socially, I lead a comfortable life as a heterosexual, white, middle-class woman. In contrast, many of my learners come from ethnic minority backgrounds, some from very low-income families that struggle to make ends meet on a daily basis. Others identify as non-binary and, so there are cultural, class and gender differences and imbalances which all intersect and influence life experience and identity. However, we appear to be unified in some respects with certain life experiences, namely feeling misunderstood and being treated in a negative way because of being perceived as different.

In summary, my motivation for this study comes from my professional concern that high-functioning autistic learners may feel misunderstood and socially isolated in the classroom. This can occur not only because of miscommunication between the high-functioning autistic learners and their peers and teachers and a misunderstanding, or only partial perception of the

nature of autism, but also because the situation in the classroom may be compounded by a pressurized learning environment. That environment is driven by the current standardised, commodified and results-driven education system that is laden with accountability. This pressurized environment focuses on gaining the optimum grade rather than on the education of the whole person and can dismiss or devalue the importance of emotions in the education and flourishing of the individual. It is a discussion of these factors and how they interplay with each other that follows. In the next section of this chapter, and in more detail in Chapter Two, I will briefly discuss my chosen theoretical perspective, the Capabilities Approach. This approach focuses on the entitlement of all learners to flourish and to be treated equitably and I will demonstrate its relevance to my professional experience as the Head of Additional Learning Support and Inclusion in a London sixth form college. This equitable and divergent view of humanity will feature throughout the Dissertation and so I will also explain my use of identity first language in this study. Following this, I will provide a chapter outline and justify my choice of scholarly sources.

There is, of course, a large body of empirical research on the education, inclusion, and support of autistic learners. I have chosen to write a conceptual Dissertation which seeks to draw together empirical research with my own professional experiences and values as a specialist Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) teacher. This decision, to focus on the conceptual, came about in order to allow me to focus on an in-depth exploration in which I might gain some conceptual and normative clarification without excluding findings and insights from other possibilities and methods. When selecting a conceptual lens with which to analyse my three concerns, I carefully considered the Capabilities Approach (CA) and its criticisms. This includes Martha C. Nussbaum's version and her work on emotions, which I discuss in Chapters Two and Five. I specifically chose Nussbaum's version of the

Capabilities Approach in preference to Sen's version as her version focuses so strongly on human dignity and flourishing. Moreover, it is a partial theory of justice and so can be expanded and developed according to an individual's needs and desires within the context in which s/he lives. I also chose Nussbaum's version rather than Sen's because she sets out a list of ten capabilities. That list provides an accessible and pragmatic way to ensure that each aspect of life, which may be complex, is addressed when creating learning opportunities for learners, yet the list is also adequately non-prescriptive enough to allow for the organic development of each capability.

When discussing the neoliberal policy backdrop to the current education system, I have chosen to refer to the works of Jeremy Bentham rather than other, more modern educational philosophers as I consider that the current neoliberal education system, has at its roots, the values of Benthamite thinking. A road map of Bentham's approach to education, in Chapter Three makes clear the contrast in values between the current neoliberal education system and those based on the Capabilities Approach. As an alternative to a neoliberal approach, Nussbaum's version of the Capabilities Approach, can, I will argue, provide the basis for a reassessment of the meaning of education and the learning environment with its emphasis on diverse ways of being and doing.

The nature of autism is broad and complex and learners considered to be lower-functioning autistic may have different needs from the learners that I teach who are considered to be high-functioning. However, some difficulties may be experienced by the majority of autistic learners and some difficulties that may be considered those low-functioning autistic learners experience may be also experienced by high-functioning autistic learners. Some autistic learners may not experience any of the difficulties discussed in this Dissertation or in

academic research: it is an individual experience. Hence labelling learners as high and low-functioning is an oversimplification of the learner's disposition and therefore problematic.

It is also necessary to briefly discuss the terms 'high-functioning' and 'low-functioning' within the context of this Dissertation. According to Kenny et al.'s (2016) study, respondents, especially parents, felt frustrated by the use of the terms 'high' and 'low' functioning. They considered the terms to be poor descriptors for their children, especially for those who did not have a co-occurring disability, but still had significant needs. These parents felt that the terms were according to Kenny et al. (2016:453) 'unhelpful shortcuts to understanding' which could result in people, specifically professionals not taking the time to get to know their child's individual specific needs and thereby failing to acknowledge learners' complexities of need within their own individual context. Similarly, Kenny et al. (2016:458) report that respondents stated that the term 'high-functioning autism' was also misleading as they felt that it assumes that 'cognitively able individuals function well in everyday life' ignoring the fact that some individuals struggle to find and maintain college places and employment because of social and emotional difficulties. These difficulties can lead to challenges to living independently and establishing and maintaining friendships and relationships. This may also result in creating a false impression that individuals deemed to be high-functioning do not require additional support, thus disabling them further. This point has been raised by a number of learners with whom I work. However, it is also important to note that in Kenny et al.'s (2016: 459) study some respondents were also divided about the use of the term 'difference' as they felt that there was a risk that they may not be offered support services if their autism was not seen as a disability. All of these phrases pertain to the medical and social models of disability (Kenny et al. 2016:459) and this suggests that perhaps a move towards a biopsychosocial model of disability as described by the World Health Organization (2018)

later in this chapter may be a useful way to develop an understanding of the complex and individual nature of autism. This will also be discussed further in Chapter Four.

The discussion of the complexity of the nature of autism is touched on and acknowledged in this Dissertation but is too vast an area to be discussed in depth. Accordingly, and because these are the learners with whom I work, I focus here on researchers' work that pertains specifically to learners categorized as high-functioning autistic rather than autistic learners in general. I also draw on the work of researchers known for their academic rigour in the field of autism and disability such as Simon Baron-Cohen, Olga Bogdashina, Katherine Runswick-Cole, Lorella Terzi, Tom Shakespeare, Dan Goodley and Rebecca Wood in preference to more traditional researchers such as Hans Asperger. These progressive researchers appear to have an understanding of autism and disability as part of the diversity of life rather than having a medical, deficit view of autism. Moreover, I have also referenced and referred to the work of researchers who are autistic themselves, such as Sean Barron and Temple Grandin, to reflect the experiences the learners that I teach tell me about in my role as a support teacher.

I chose Thomas Armstrong's methods to improve inclusion in the classroom as this appears to be an effective practical way to implement the Capabilities Approach and provide learning opportunities that address Nussbaum's list of ten capabilities. Armstrong's method celebrates diversity and is based on a strengths approach which acknowledges learners' strengths ahead of their difficulties. This is in contrast to more traditional methods of support, for example Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), which arguably attempt to change the way the individual behaves so that s/he conforms to society by positively reinforcing 'desired behaviours' (Parker, 2015). However, it is important to note that Armstrong's Positive Niche

Construction is only one example of a possible way of implementing Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach in the classroom and is not referred to here in an exclusive or exhaustive sense. Finally, I also chose to include references and quotes from researchers outside the medical or psychological profession such as Steve Silberman, a journalist who has a personal interest in autism, as he provides a different observational perspective and personal narrative and has been instrumental in promoting neurodiversity.

Selecting the order of chapters for this Dissertation was challenging because all the factors I will discuss relate to each other in a complex interplay. I am not suggesting that there is a best or correct order of priority, but I have chosen to place them in the sequence I am about to describe in order to layer and make my argument, based on my own professional context. I start with the wider backdrop to my working context including current Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) education policy and then spotlight the specific situation of high-functioning autistic learners and their support in the sixth form college in which I work. With the three concerns outlined above in mind, one of the key arguments of this Dissertation is that a pressurised working environment created by this wider backdrop puts at risk the relationship between the teacher and the high-functioning autistic learner, a relationship vital to the education and support of learners and human flourishing.

Another key argument is that emotions are fundamental to human relationships and it is through discussion and interaction within such relationships that a person learns and flourishes. Nussbaum, through her work on emotions, acknowledges that key to human relationships are the emotions of empathy and compassion which can form relationships of trust, which I will argue are the key to providing better support for autistic learners. In Chapter Six, I will also argue that, in practical terms, Nussbaum's central capabilities may be

facilitated through Armstrong's (2012) Positive Niche Construction and democratic and discursive classrooms.

I will start by addressing my first concern and so analyse the current neoliberal funding driven and meritocratic educational support system. This will provide the basis for my argument that this policy background, and its values, pressurises high-functioning autistic learners and their teachers and values only one type of human being and doing. In Chapter Two, I will provide an account of autism, starting with the medical model and outlining how autism is diagnosed and labelled. I will argue that this model regards the high-functioning autistic individual as having a deficit within themselves, with a view to effecting a cure, and with the aim of making the high-functioning autistic person behave in a non-autistic manner. Next, I will explain the social model which, in contrast to the medical model, considers that the disabling factors are the attitudinal, social, and physical barriers created by the society in which the individual lives rather than viewing the individual as having a deficit. Critics of this model such as Terzi (2004) argue that the social model presents a partial and flawed understanding of disability in relation to impairment and society. One reason Terzi (2004) claims is because it tends to dismiss the pain and difficulties that the individual may experience due to the biological aspects of her/his neurological make-up which interacts in a complex manner with societal barriers, although she does acknowledge the value of the social model. I will then discuss a third model, the biopsychosocial model mentioned earlier in this chapter, which incorporates both the medical and social models, considering the interaction between individual's biological neurological makeup, her/his psychological disposition, and the barriers that society presents to the high-functioning autistic individual. I will contend that this model fits with an alternative account of the nature of autism, that is the neurodivergent account, which views autism as part of the diversity of biological evolution

rather than as a deficit within the individual. It is this model that I will argue is most appropriate for creating a value system for SEND education and support.

The Capabilities Approach itself is detailed in Chapter Three, but in the second part of Chapter Two, and to avoid repetition, I will detail how the Capabilities Approach fits alongside the biopsychosocial model of understanding autism. This is because not only does it have a focus on the dignity and flourishing of the individual as a citizen of equal value in society recognising the riches of diversity, but it also encompasses a wide understanding of what it means to be human and recognizes that there are multiple ways of flourishing. I will use Martha Nussbaum's version (2006a) of the Capabilities Approach because individual dignity, value and respect are at its core, giving prominence to learners as social and political beings and as ends in themselves, not as a means to a utilitarian end for the benefit of wider society. The Capabilities Approach, I contend, could empower educators to provide learning opportunities to enable learners to achieve the plans and goals that those learners freely choose and value. I will, additionally, propose that the Capabilities Approach can serve to extend theoretical research in practical ways in order to advance developments in existing inclusive education with respect to equity, dignity, respect, freedom and flourishing and to a focus on what people are able to do, to be, and to become.

In Chapter Three, I will outline the current SEND education policy landscape. This will provide the economic, social, and political context within which I work and summarise some of the external drivers that influence the sixth form classroom. In providing this account, I will argue that the current education system in England has its roots in the thinking of Jeremy Bentham, particularly in ideas of standardisation and meritocracy and so I will draw on Bentham's work, namely *Chrestomathia* (1816) and his panopticon model of education.

Additionally, I will discuss the idea of the social contract which, I will argue, also forms the background to current educational policy and practice. Here I contend that standardisation and meritocracy make the social contract unfair to those in minority groups who do not fit into a socially accepted norm. In my argument, I will draw on Martha Nussbaum's (2006a) critique of the social contract from her account of three problems of social justice that she argues remain unresolved by social contract theory. I will also draw on her critique of meritocracy as well as referring to Michael Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (2020) in which he calls for a rethinking of the notion of success and failure and argues that meritocracy generates a disposition of judgements imposed on the marginalised and vulnerable. This reconsideration of meritocracy, I will argue, is key to developing both education policy and the educator as a reflective practitioner.

I shall then argue that the Capabilities Approach, specifically Nussbaum's version with her list of ten central capabilities, fits well as a proposed alternative approach to education by acknowledging human value and diversity and promoting solidarity and nurturing human flourishing. I will give an account of the approach and how it addresses the problems of equity and inclusion outlined by offering an alternative definition of what it means to be human with regard to personhood, human dignity and human flourishing. Using Martha Nussbaum's work on disability, particularly in *Frontiers of Justice*: *Disability, Nationality and Species Membership* (2006a), and her work on emotions in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001b) and *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (2015), I build on my argument about the need to embrace diverse definitions of what it means to be human. In Chapters Two and Three I argue that her version of the Capabilities Approach offers an ethical approach to education. This alternative approach, to the current utilitarian, commodified and skills driven education agenda I contend, allows a focus on

positive opportunities for the flourishing of the individual and embraces diversity, emotion, and vulnerability rather than focusing on need as a deficit as in the medical model of support for high-functioning autistic learners. Nussbaum (2009) argues that people with cognitive differences or disabilities, which include autism, should be recognised as equal citizens both in the law and in daily living. She suggests that it is not enough for the law to promote equal medical care and meet housing and economic needs, but that people must also have equitable access to education, even if this is costly and involves considerable change in current pedagogical models and approaches. I will argue in Chapter Three that these factors form the external hegemonic pressures and challenges placed upon autistic learners and their teachers in the classroom. This pressurised environment, I will contend, creates an arena that may spark heated arguments and impulsive behaviour which may, in turn, damage the confidence and lower the self-esteem of both the learner and the teacher. Furthermore, I will suggest that these external pressures may place unnecessary pressure on the learner-teacher relationship, communication and social interaction thereby preventing teachers from getting to know their learners as unique individuals and forming a better and a stronger understanding of their specific needs as high-functioning autistic learners.

In Chapter Four, to address my second concern and in order to improve the understanding of autism, particularly the social and emotional difficulties high-functioning autistic learners face in the classroom, I will provide a detailed account of autism from a personal perspective in my own working context and here I will also provide a psychological account of autism. For this, I refer to the works of autism scholar Simon Baron-Cohen, particularly empathizing-systematizing theory in his work *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (1995). I draw on this theory because it provides an insight into the varied ways in which a high-functioning autistic person may perceive the world and empathize. In addition, I also

refer to the work of autism researcher Olga Bogdashina, specifically her work *Theory of Mind and the Triad of Perspectives on Autism and Asperger Syndrome* (2006). This text offers a comparison and reconciliation of different and often conflicting views on diagnosis, theories and development and in so doing provides an understanding which can help bridge the gap between high-functioning autistic learners and their teachers. Additionally, I refer to Katherine Runswick-Cole, Rebecca Mallet and Sami Timimi's *Re-thinking Autism: Diagnosis, Identity and Equality* (2016) and Oliver Woods and Tom Shakespeare's work as their research examines autism and disability from the perspective of autism as a socially or culturally produced phenomenon and provides a critique of the medical, deficit model.

I also refer to the reference book of mental health professional Bill Nason, *The Autism Discussion Page: On the Core Challenges of Autism* (2014) to provide a perspective from the educational setting to supplement reflections on my own experiences. Originally an online community page, his book is considered by many teachers as a key resource, a toolbox to help them understand and support high-functioning autistic learners in the classroom. I will then outline some of the difficulties teachers face in the classroom including the effects of the barriers discussed in Chapter Three which, I argue, add pressure to their environment. The final parts of Chapter Four and Chapter Five address my third concern and discuss the common emotions that the pressures and challenges discussed in Chapters Three and Four create, leading to an environment that is fraught with anxiety, fear and feelings of vulnerability. Building on my argument discussed in Chapters Two, Three and Four, I contend that these emotions are not signs of weakness but are part of the human condition and, if acknowledged and used appropriately, may provide a sense of solidarity between the learner and the teacher.

Using Nussbaum's argument that a person is a social and political animal by nature, as introduced in Chapter Two, I develop this in Chapter Five where I discuss her work on the role of emotions in the human condition and flourishing. Here I focus on the argument that her Capabilities Approach may provide an underpinning philosophy to enable positive relationships to develop, giving all learners the opportunity and capability to flourish equitably with dignity and respect. Moreover, I contend that these social and emotional relationships may provide educational opportunities for both autistic and non-autistic learners and teachers to flourish through mutual learning journeys, academically and personally. Hence, I follow Nussbaum's (2006a) view that one's own flourishing is bound up with another's. I also suggest that trust between a teacher and a learner can provide a stable and necessary foundation upon which to base a learning environment that nurtures a person's capability and potential. If a person says and does what they mean in a compassionate way, this person may then be a point of reference and stability for the high-functioning autistic learner as they look at and live in the world. I will argue that if a learner has a person or people who is or are willing to try to develop a comprehensive understanding of the autistic learner's thought processes, perceptions, and emotions as a unique individual, then anxiety may diminish, and learners may flourish. I will also contend that if teachers are prepared to share their own strengths, weaknesses, and personal experiences with their high-functioning autistic learners, in other words to share their own vulnerability whilst maintaining boundaries that respect their own and others' dignity and value, this will aid all areas of learning, including the improvement of academic grades.

In Chapter Six, I will exemplify, from a practical perspective, how Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach could be realised in the classroom and suggest the use of pedagogical methods including those successfully employed at the college in which I work. These include a

mixture of Positive Niche Construction and the use of discussion in the classroom to build relationships, embracing the concept of neurodiversity. To discuss this, I will draw on the work of Thomas Armstrong's *Neurodiversity in the Classroom: Strength-Based Strategies to Help Students with Special Needs Succeed in School and Life* (2012) and Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill's work *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms, Second Edition* (2005). This will inform my argument that key to overcoming the difficulties that learners and their teachers face in the classroom are working relationships of trust, based on the emotions of empathy and compassion between high-functioning autistic learners and their teachers. I will contend these form the basis of fruitful and meaningful social and emotional interaction in the classroom that may lead to human flourishing and meaningful inclusion.

Drawing together all of the factors discussed, Chapter Seven will conclude the Dissertation with a summary of the main arguments including an acknowledgement of the particularity of the Dissertation. I will then show how this research contributes to the conceptual study of pedagogical approaches and the education of the high-functioning autistic learners in the sixth form classroom in which I work and I shall discuss implications for future study and recommend changes in policy and practice. As this Dissertation includes my own personal narrative regarding the teaching and support of high-functioning autistic learners, the conclusion will also include my own reflections about the Dissertation journey and the lessons it has taught me as a reflective practitioner, an educational researcher, and a member of humanity.

As this is a conceptual Dissertation without approval for empirical data collection and use, I will not directly quote the learners I teach but I will use examples from Sean Barron and

Temple Grandin's *Unwritten Rules of Social Relationship: Decoding Social Mysteries Through Autism's Unique Perspectives* (2016). Here Barron and Grandin, both high-functioning autistic themselves, share their experiences of autism in social situations including those of their adolescence in the classroom. As discussed earlier in this chapter, it is a favourite book of my students as they ask me to read from it when discussing their experiences as autistic learners and some have asked me to include examples from the book in this Dissertation in order to communicate their life experiences to the reader. Therefore, I will use quotations from their work to reflect the voices of the learners in the college.

There is a degree of self-ethnography in this Dissertation, which I will refer to as auto-ethnography. I call attention to my personal and professional experiences that led to this study and use them as examples to exemplify my arguments. However, I chose not to do an auto-ethnographical study *per se* because this Dissertation offered a rare opportunity to delve deeply into the conceptual theory underpinning the values and concerns in my teaching practice as Head of Additional Learning Support and Inclusion. My aim was to enable myself and others including specialist and non-specialist practitioners, to have access to an understanding of high-functioning autistic learners that could enable them to interact with such learners in empathetic in inclusive ways. When I first started writing this Dissertation, I was not expecting to be diagnosed with a hidden disability yet when I was, I shared an epiphanic moment with the learners. In this respect, aspects of this Dissertation are auto-ethnographic following Ronai (1995) who argues that auto-ethnographers must consider ways in which others may experience similar epiphanies to illustrate experience and in doing so to find in each other a commonality.

Of course, some will say that a limitation to this Dissertation is that it is non-inclusive as I have not directly used and analysed the voice of the learners with the exception of two brief examples provided with the learners' permission, and I am very aware of this potential limitation. Botha et al. (2021) argue that there is a risk that the narratives of minorities may be ignored or discounted in favour of the researcher's own perspective. Although this may pertain, I would argue that no work is unbiased, especially in such complex fields as autism and disability studies. Woods et al. (2018:978) highlight the complexity and high sensitivity of autism research and argue that theoretical and methodological approaches that are emancipatory and value the highly individual nature of autism and its diverse culture are critical for developing new lines of research inquiry in autism studies. Furthermore, they suggest that autism studies scholarship requires 'epistemological integrity' by acknowledging the importance of the direct voice of autistic people in research whilst ensuring that there is no dichotomy between autistic and non-autistic authorship. Because I opted for a conceptual study in which I did not draw on the direct voices of my learners this remains a potential limitation but my plan is for this study to provide the groundwork for me to pursue empirical work in which I seek the views and the voices, of the learners in focus here.

It is also important to note that I refer to Runswick-Cole et al.'s (2016) book *Re-thinking Autism* in this dissertation, a book which, according to Woods et al. (2018) is a Critical Autism Studies (CAS) work. Woods et al. (2018) claim that Runswick-Cole et al. (2016) follow a narrow definition of this type of study, which is the questioning of diagnosis as scientifically valid and the meaning of labelling, rather than focusing on the autonomous voice of the autistic individual, which Woods et al. (2018) argue should be the focus of CAS. This Dissertation is not presented as CAS nor is it a qualitative or quantative study. It is, rather, a personal reflection of my professional context and, as noted above, the study

provided an opportunity to delve into theory. I tried, nonetheless, to reflect the voices of the autistic learners I work with by using Barron and Grandin's (2016) book *The Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships* to discuss examples with the students I teach. I chose this book because it is a favourite amongst my students: they say that they can identify with the specific examples that Barron and Grandin provide. Through our discussions and my reading of the book with them, some learners identified with the examples that I gave and advised me to use those examples as illustrations of their own similar experiences and to illustrate my argument in the Dissertation. As I did not have ethical approval to use the learners' own voices, the book was used as a channel of examples to convey how the learners experience life. I also read out parts of my argument in the Dissertation, particularly Chapter Four on classroom difficulties for high-functioning autistic learners and asked for their opinion. I then included the most salient difficulties having consulted with them on what I should include regarding theory in that Chapter. Similarly, I read out sections of the Dissertation to my colleagues regarding the difficulties and stresses they experience in the classroom and discussed this with them with this discussion informing me about what I should include. Hence, I suggest that, albeit in a limited sense this Dissertation is both collaborative and not entirely non-inclusive.

Furthermore, I acknowledge that as a conceptual Dissertation based on my own working context and professional experiences, there is an element of bias. Ellis et al. (2011) argue that studies with elements of autoethnography represent an approach that acknowledges and accommodates for subjectivity and emotionality while remaining a valid method of research. I acknowledge that my reality is not necessarily another's reality and so there is no objective truth, only a perception of a reality. This is unavoidable as I am seeing events through my own lens, but I hope that I have heeded the discussions with the learners and teachers enough

to reflect their views as part of a shared experience. Therefore, in this Dissertation, I seek to be reflexive with respect to the conceptual theory summarized here and to relate it to my professional and personal experiences and to a certain extent, to the experiences of the learners as I develop my own understanding and the understanding of others such as non-specialist professional practitioners who might read this work. This will be discussed in further detail in the concluding chapter.

I will also describe specific situations I have observed in college as far as the ethical boundaries of this Dissertation will allow. Throughout the Dissertation, I will refer to practice and professional experiences from my professional context, maintaining confidentiality by creating fictitious characters in hypothetical situations. I have also included several references to learners and a colleague, and for all I have obtained signed permissions (see appendix A). Before moving to Chapter Two, and because the topic of this Dissertation is both politically and emotionally sensitive, I will now pause to offer an explanation of the language that I use.

Terms and language used in this Dissertation

The terms and language used in this Dissertation required careful clarification and consideration. Botha et al. (2020:692) stress that 'language shapes our understanding of autism' and our understanding of people in the autistic community. Moreover, they suggest that autistic people should be directing the language used to describe themselves as they are vulnerable to experiencing violations of their human rights or may be at risk of being treated as less than human and so are at risk of feeling shame. Vivanti (2019:692) notes that this is particularly important for 'those in the most impaired end of the spectrum…who are less equipped to advocate for their rights'. If this holds true, then it is imperative that autistic

people have autonomy over the language that is used to describe themselves and as the language used to describe autism pertains to perception and self-image, it is personal and sensitive. Furthermore, Kenny et al. (2016:459) argue that an autistic person, the parent of an autistic person or a professional working with autistic people may use one type of rhetoric to describe an autistic person in one context and a different type of rhetoric in another. For example, parents when talking to a doctor who is a specialist in autism and when talking to non-specialist subject teachers at a parent review evening may use different language. Additionally, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5*) and the *World Health Organization (WHO) International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)* are constantly updated reflecting the evolving knowledge and understanding about autism. Hence Kenny et al. (2016:433) argue these changes 'should affect the way autism is perceived, understood and referred to in broader society'. If this is the case, then it is vital that the direct voices of autistic people are heard when developing medical, psychological and educational policy and practice.

Unsurprisingly then, there is much debate over terminology regarding autism. Generally, there are two types of term employed, although there are others. The first type is person first language, as in, for example, a person with autism. According to Anderson-Chavarria (2021), person first language aims to acknowledge that a human is first and foremost a person: s/he may have a diagnosis, but that diagnosis does not define who that person is. This type of language was promoted as an equalizing tool for people with a disability. However, in a study carried out by Kenny et al. (2016:457), many of the autistic adults questioned about which terminology they preferred suggested that language that separates a person's autism from her/his identity both undermines the positive characteristics of autism and maintains the idea that autism is an 'inherently wrong way of being'. Bogdashina (2006) claims that person first

phraseology was initiated by non-autistic people to show respect for people in the autistic community because they were seen as suffering from an incurable disorder. Some people, such as advocates of the neurodiversity movement, may argue that this follows the medical, deficit model of autism that I will discuss later in Chapter Two, and it may imply that the person is somehow flawed. By contrast, advocates of identity first language, such as the neurodiversity community, use terms such as high-functioning autistic person. They claim that this identity first language aims to recognize that autism is part of human diversity, that autistic people are different not less than any other, just as each person is uniquely individual.

Kenny et al. (2016:443) state that identity first language, also known as disability-first language aligns with 'those autism community members who perceive their diagnosis…to be an accepted part of their identity'. According to Bagatell (2010), disability-first language signals an autistic person's position of inclusion in a community. One could argue that this may cause the formation of an 'out group, an 'othering' of autistic people, but we are all a part of one group or another within society in different aspects of our lives, for example, as a member of a religious community or a community with a shared interest. Being part of a community may enable a person to feel affiliated, and affiliation, according to Nussbaum (2010), is a central capability, (see Chapter Two) needed in order to be able to fully flourish as an individual human within a cultural and social context and within the wider community of humanity. Anderson-Chavarria (2021) argues that a neurodiversity approach, that is an approach that encompasses a broad understanding of what it means to be human, aims to depart from a deficit model of understanding differences in learning and communication and from the practice of creating an 'other' group due to behaviour that is perceived to be socially and emotionally different.

A neurodivergent approach to the understanding of autism provides the opportunity for a nuanced understanding of autism that may change given the environment within which the individual finds her/himself. For example, if allowed to use headphones when studying an autistic learner may feel less anxious. The absence of anxiety may mean that the learner can focus more, be better able to process information, and feel more confident to be creative. The environment that an individual finds her/himself in then may then disable or empower an autistic individual. Because of this, Anderson-Chavarria (2021) argues that the concepts of disability and neurodiversity are compatible while the concepts of disorder and neurodiversity are incompatible. Anderson-Chavarria (2021:15) suggests that the neurodiversity approach does not ignore 'the significant, physical, psychological, socio-emotional challenges' faced by individuals in a society that may limit their participation and success.

Singer (2020) locates the concept of neurodiversity within the realm of biodiversity because both are a feature of the earth, specifically referring to the infinite variation of human cognition and the uniqueness of the human mind as part of wider creation. Singer (2021) also claims that she coined the term 'neurodiversity' for two specific political functions, that is to promote an acknowledgement and understanding of inter-relatedness and to 'suggest an umbrella term' for the social and political work of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Movement. Inter-relatedness in this sense is the interconnected nature of the social dimensions of an individual's situational context such as psychological and biological disposition, culture, class, gender and sexuality. Furthermore, Singer (2020) argues that identity first language is about empowerment and the recognition that brains are structured in different ways, so characteristics classified as autism are not 'abnormal' but are, rather, a variation of the human brain. Accordingly, the term neurodiversity is not a synonym for the term 'neurological

disorder' as some critics may suggest, but refers to diverse ways of being human. Singer (2020) states that the term neurodiversity is not a psycho-medical diagnosis for an individual, nor is it a tool for dividing people into groups.

With this in mind, I suggest that both Singer and Nussbaum might argue that there is no such being as a person who is neurotypical, there is no 'normal': we are all neurodiverse as no two humans on the earth are exactly alike. With this in mind, identity first language may serve to remove the stigma of autism and highlight autism as a different but equally valid way of being, as a unique way of viewing and thinking about the world. Cristina (2017) a high-functioning autistic blogger asserts:

> Everything that I am good at...has been filtered through my brain. My autistic brain…my drive to systematize [create logical and efficient systems], the ability to deeply focus on details, my drive to learn and assimilate information, my extreme empathy - and my creativity – are heightened because I am autistic…This is our neurology. It makes me who I am…It makes us live, do, be, feel, experience, sense, love and learn differently. (Cristina, 2017)

This notion that human diversity, including neurological diversity, accords with Nussbaum's argument regarding equal citizenship and is discussed throughout this Dissertation, and is the particular focus of Chapters Two and Five, with reference to a political conception of the individual as a subject of justice. For the autistic learner, whilst not dismissing the difficulties an individual may experience, the argument for neurodiversity recognises that the creative and divergent way that s/he may think may bring to the table unique and even revolutionary ideas, theories, and innovations, with much to contribute to society and its future development. In this way, one can acknowledge the high-functioning autistic individual as an equal, fully functioning citizen, not a person with a disability who is deemed less than any other because s/he may not think in the conventional way generally accepted by a society. That is not to say that autistic students considered to be low-functioning are any less fully

functioning citizens, but they function in a different way and so their voices may be heard in a different way.

On the other hand, it could be argued that identity first language may ignore individual internal barriers, focusing largely on external symptoms and environmental barriers and thus dismissing the difficulties that individuals face daily. Critics of this approach, such as Nelson (2020), argue that, although perhaps unintentionally, identity first language may suggest a divisive, dichotomized view of the world in which a person is either 'in' or 'out' especially if it is used in the popular media. Nonetheless, there is much research to suggest that an autism diagnosis is a psychiatric and neurological construct that denotes a complex spectrum which is, as Russell (2020) describes it, a series of inter-relational multidimensional traits. This includes people who do not have an autism diagnosis but have high-functioning autistic traits. This means that there is no clear bimodal distribution separating people with and without autism, so there are no two distinct populations. Instead, high-functioning autistic traits are distributed to one degree or another across the whole human population. Therefore, whilst the neurodiversity movement may seek a non-pathologizing form of identity and the high-functioning autistic activist community has made a great contribution towards this, it could be argued that their aim, somewhat paradoxically, may sit uncomfortably with the term 'high-functioning autistic person'.

Chapman (2019) argues that a neurodiversity approach presents a paradigmatic shift away from pathological neurological difference which may encourage some high-functioning autistic people to celebrate high-functioning autistic forms of self-expression and communication, and view these attributes as strengths, enabling them to flourish as unique, creative and innovative thinkers. For some high-functioning autistic people, the

neurodiversity approach, in this context, the use of identity-first language is viewed both as an empowering concept and as a social movement that acknowledges forms of communication and self-expression that may be unique to an individual. Others prefer to use person first language such as 'person with autism' as they feel that their autism does not define who they are as human beings. While some autistic people are concerned about being labelled, without a medical diagnosis, they may be denied support within school, college or work. Others see their autism as a complex mixture of elements of their inherent identity which does not completely define who they are. Wood (2019:35) advises that, because of these complexities, 'we must proceed with caution when employing the notion of difference'. The use of language is thus a matter of personal and political preference. However, as this Dissertation is about the recognition of neurodiversity, I will use identity first language. For the same reason, I will refer to autism not as a learning difficulty or disorder but as a learning difference.

To summarize, in this chapter, by attempting to address the problems and concerns that I have outlined, it is my intention that this Dissertation will contribute to the development of the discourse around the educational values that acknowledge individual human dignity, mutual respect and human flourishing particularly in respect to high-functioning autistic learners. Furthermore, I hope that this study will help change the conversation about high-functioning autistic learners in the classroom from a discourse of disability to one of diversity. Ultimately, my wish is that this Dissertation will assist in developing an appreciation of the strengths of high-functioning autistic learners and for the difficulties that they and their teachers face in the sixth form classroom. In particular, this study aims to provide some insight into how these difficulties may be overcome, particularly with a focus on emotionally based working relationships in the classroom that focus on mutual respect and

valuing, a striving for understanding and effective communication. It is also my intention that this Dissertation might encourage professional specialist and non-specialist educational practitioners alike to construct positive learning environments which, I will argue, provide an important basis for the sort of working relationships that lead to learner and teacher flourishing. I will now turn, in Chapter Two, to different types of models of disability, to the differing values of each, and to how these values underpin current education and SEND policy and practice, as a prelude to the discussion of this in Chapter Three.

Chapter Two: The nature of autism, three models of disability and the Capabilities Approach

High-functioning autism is complex in both its nature and how it is comprehended and viewed by the medical and educational worlds and by wider society. Hence, I will seek here to disentangle some of these complexities in order to provide a foundation upon which to layer my argument around the education and effective support of high-functioning autistic learners. This chapter is in two parts. Firstly, I will give a medical account of autism and how it is diagnosed and labelled according to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), a universally accepted method of diagnosis in the field of psychiatry. Secondly, I will discuss how it is situated within the medical model and argue how this is problematic. I will then propose an alternative account of autism based on evolutionary theory and focusing on humanity's diversity. This will lead to a discussion of the social and biopsychosocial models, the latter of which I will argue fits well with the Capabilities Approach. This, I argue is because the Capabilities Approach, like the biopsychosocial model, focuses on an individual's dignity and flourishing in terms of functioning and capability. This includes the learning opportunities afforded the individual as a social and political being to make free and informed decisions about her/his life and may enable an individual to move along the journey of self-realisation.

In the next part of the chapter, I will give an account of the Capabilities Approach and how it addresses the problem of equity and inclusion by offering a particular view of personhood and what it means to be human. This is because I argue that it is an approach that is based on an understanding of dignity that embraces diversity and acknowledges that vulnerability is a shared part of the human condition: it is not a weakness. However, it is important to note that no single model can offer a complete explanation of the nature of autism or of disability,

rather each model may provide a useful perspective within a given context. Nonetheless, in order to compare the values within the models, I will begin with a medical account of the diagnosis of autism.

An account of autism: how it is currently diagnosed and labelled

There is no laboratory test for diagnosing autism, so medical practitioners rely on observing behaviours and, in England as elsewhere, this is a complex process. According to the National Health Service (NHS, 2019), the assessment team may ask about a child's developmental milestones such as when s/he started talking; observe how a child interacts and plays, look out for unusual communication and social interaction and restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, and read school and medical reports. The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2021) defines Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a complex 'neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterised by difficulties with social communication and social interaction' (American Psychiatric Association, 2021:1). In the APA's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* (2013), the manual used for diagnosing autism in England, the main symptoms include 'persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across contexts, not accounted for by general developmental delays' and 'restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities'. The manual also states that symptoms must be 'present in early childhood', although may not completely become apparent until later in life where more social interaction is required and symptoms must 'limit and impair everyday functioning' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The manual also explains that the term 'spectrum' is used because of the heterogeneity in the presentation and severity of 'symptoms' as well as in the skills and level of functioning of the individual, which means that each individual's experience of autism is different.

This is the medical model of viewing autism and it presents three main problems. Firstly, the catalogue of symptoms measures the progress of an individual against expected age milestones that are standardised norms. Anything that does not fit within the category of 'average' or 'normal' for an individual's chronological age is considered to be a deficit within the individual. The term 'disorder' implies that there is an accepted 'norm' but there is no known 'order' and so I contend that it is society's narrow understanding of what is deemed to be 'normal' that distorts the view of a person's functioning and what it means to be human. Furthermore, Boellstorff and Thomas (2017) consider that the autism spectrum disorder metaphor assigns a person to a particular diagnostic classification and positions an autistic individual within the spectrum itself with the individual in a position unique to them. They argue that it thus ignores the variability of the individual autistic experience and the diversity and inter-relatedness of autistic experiences, bifurcating experience and categorizing an individual into subjective low and high functioning polarities. Through categorizing in such a way, the complexities of an autistic person's unique disposition and context may be oversimplified and the individual's unique experience of life and the difficulties that s/he faces may be overlooked. In an educational context, this may mean that learning support plans may not really be tailored to the individual's strengths and needs and support may then become mechanistic rather than truly inclusive.

Nussbaum (2006a) argues that when a person behaves differently from a socially accepted norm, s/he is often considered to be somehow less than human. Often society does not consider that there are multiple ways of being human and functioning, all equally valid, and it is through a norm-based or standardised view of what it means to be a fully functioning

human being that this becomes an injustice, which Kapp (2019) argues denies a person basic respect and dignity. This idea is developed in more detail in Chapter Three.

Secondly, this medical model uses medical terms and rhetoric concerning autism such as 'impairment' implying a deficit within the person that needs to be cured and this rhetoric has permeated educational policy, support documentation and plans. Furthermore, Wood (2019:31) argues that this model of viewing autism has activated the development of 'interventions designed to diminish autistic symptoms and behaviours', not recognizing that a person may be different in the way s/he thinks and what s/he says or does. This attitude towards autism, Wood (2019:31) asserts is 'deeply rooted in the psyches of educators, parents, autism practitioners and the like'. Thirdly, the assessments used for diagnosis involve standardised scores, some of which are registered as the opinion of the parent, carer or the medical professional, as emotion cannot easily be measured numerically. It could, therefore, be argued that a professional is making a decision as to whether or not a person is deemed to be 'abnormal' based on their own and another's subjective observations and opinions.

Generally accepted social norms about the definition of being human, which may be biased, are learned through a child's upbringing and interaction with wider society and contribute to an individual's past experiences and background. Navarro (2020) suggests that through these social norms and the individual's tendency to organise social worlds by categorizing them, resulting in unconscious bias which occurs automatically as the brain makes quick judgements based on these parameters. As a result of unconscious bias, certain people benefit while others are penalized. In the classroom, this may be manifested by the teacher subconsciously making assumptions about an autistic learner's academic, social and

emotional abilities and functioning. The concept and effects of unconscious bias will be explored in more detail in Chapter Four.

In contrast to the medical model, the social model of disability, as defined by Oliver (1990), maintains that people are disabled by the barriers operating in society that exclude and discriminate against them. These barriers include attitudinal, social and physical obstacles that perpetuate prejudice, discrimination and exclusion, such as an assumption that a high-functioning autistic person cannot be left alone with a child because s/he is not responsible enough. Physical barriers may include an over-stimulating sensory environment. When individuals become overwhelmed on a sensory level they may momentarily have difficulty expressing their feelings and they may experience a complete loss of environmental awareness. The social model analyses cultural tendencies and the use of medical language and promotes, instead, the use of language that describes a person's individual and contextualised needs more accurately and in a less judgemental way than the medical model, referring, for example, to an individual's 'access to needs' instead of her/his 'special needs'. Furthermore, Anastasiou and Kauffman, (2013) suggest that the social model of autism rejects a deficit-focused understanding and reframes it as a social construction and the result of societal oppression, considering the political, economic and socio-interactional context of the person including the role that institutions play in the construct of disability. However, it is noteworthy for this study that criticisms of this model include its dismissal of the specific difficulties and experiences of certain groups. Amongst its criticisms, is Terzi's (2020:155) argument that the social model of disability's limitations includes its over-socialisation of aspects of disability, the lack of acknowledgement of the effects of impairment and the rejection of the concept of normality in the sense of average human functioning, which could lead, she argues to theoretically undesirable conclusions.

Additionally, Shakespeare (2006) criticizes the social model arguing that it creates unnecessary dichotomies of impairment and disability, which perpetuates the marginalization of individuals with disabilities within society. He suggests that it is not easy to distinguish between the limitations of the body and the barriers imposed by society that prevent an individual from functioning or accessing a resource. Furthermore, Arnold (2016) suggests that Runswick-Cole et al. (2016) recognize autism as being a solely cultural issue, ignoring genetic factors in families, the flourishing of autistic culture and the importance of an autistic person's own view of what autism means to that individual and how this affects self-esteem and well-being. Shakespeare and Watson (2002), recognizing that constructions of identity are individual and complex, argue that complete acknowledgement of a person's full identity is often prevented in the context of disability because an 'impairment' label can become the

> … most prominent and relevant feature of a person's life, dominating interactions and ignoring other aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality and ethnicity. (Shakespeare and Watson, 2002:71)

Furthermore, Shakespeare and Watson (2002) argue that by listening to an individual's direct voice, the inter-relatedness and highly individual experience of autism can be explored effectively, developing disability discourse and identity and promoting a nuanced, multi-dimensional understanding of the lived autistic experience. It is crucial then, that autism studies are interdisciplinary, focusing on inter-relatedness, contextualisation and culture, and the autistic voice as I argue is the case with the biopsychosocial model of understanding autism. I have already explained why in Chapter One, however, my own study was not fully inclusive with respect to listening to direct voices.

Offering an alternative definition from that of the APA, Nason (2014) describes autism as a neuro-biological difference in how the brain is wired. Consequently, he argues that high-

functioning autistic people have areas in which their processing is stronger or weaker than non-high-functioning autistic people: they are not worse or better, just different. Because of this, both high-functioning autistic and non-high-functioning autistic people can learn from each other. If different strengths and interests can be nourished then both teachers and learners may flourish, develop strong self-esteem, and feel safe, loved, accepted and competent, becoming autonomous adults on the journey to self-actualisation. It is rather like the bridging of two cultures, learning to accept and embrace difference in thinking and perception, with each person flourishing in their own individual way, whilst simultaneously growing from sharing each other's strengths and differences. Furthermore, recognition of neurological difference or neurodiversity can promote innovation, dynamism and success in the educational environment and workforce. This is because if there are different types of creative and divergent thinkers in a group, there will be an enrichment from different perspectives and creativity and problem-solving, all of which can strengthen each individual and enhance the capacity of the group to achieve a desired outcome. Syed (2019) argues that such diversity in groups is key to successful innovation and development in all aspects of life but especially in the work force.

> The link between recombinant innovation and diversity should be obvious. Recombination is about cross-pollination, reaching across the problem space, bringing together ideas that have never been connected before. (Syed 2019:135)

So, if the future of a post-industrial world relies on creativity and innovation to make it a better place to live in for all, then a range of neurodivergent thinkers will be important for its success.

Embracing neurodiversity, the biopsychosocial model of disability, the model which will be used in this Dissertation re-frames disability by recognising that the interactions between people's genetic and biological make-up, psychological disposition and sociocultural

environment contribute to a person's being and perception of being. This is the model used in *The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health Framework (ICF)*, approved by the World Health Assembly in 2001 and used as a benchmark across the world, acknowledging that functioning and disability are complex, multidimensional concepts. The World Health Organization (2001:10) claims that this model merges the medical and social models by viewing disability and functioning as outcomes of interactions between health conditions and contextual factors. The ICF (2001:2) identifies two main factors that interact with each other and influence how a person experiences disability. Firstly, there are environmental factors including 'social attitudes, architectural characteristics, social structures, climate, terrain and so forth'. Secondly, there are personal factors including 'gender, age, coping styles, social background, education, profession, past and current experience, overall behaviour pattern, character and other factors' (ICF, 2001:2). This model contends that each of these factors interact with each other either positively or negatively and this interaction determines the course of one's development and the assessment of a person's health and well-being. This can also be described as an inter-relational model described earlier in Chapter One.

The biopsychosocial model was first established by George Engel (1977) and developed further by Waddle and Aylward (2010). Engel (1977) recognized that a patient has their own thoughts, feelings and perspectives. His model reflected the development of illness through the complex interaction of a person's biological, psychological and social factors and placed an emphasis on talking to patients to find out what difficulties they experienced, their psychological perspective of their disability and their barriers to life rather than merely relying on scientific research produced by the medical profession. Later, Waddle and Aylward developed this model further, claiming that

> … the biopsychosocial model recognizes that biological, psychological and social factors, and the interaction between them, can influence the course and outcome of any illness. (Waddle and Aylward, 2010:42)

However, Shakespeare et al. (2017:3) criticize Waddle and Aylward's model for not being based on underlying theory or empirical evidence and they claim it does not explore the nature of the interaction between the biological, psychological and social factors of patients and so 'does not represent evidence-based policy' and has a focus on the 'absence of sickness' (Shakespeare et al., 2017:36). Shakespeare et al. (2017) argue that following the biopsychosocial model might mean that governments and policy makers could argue that it is the negative attitudes of disabled people that prevent them from working rather than their physical, neurological or psychological disability, thus encouraging discrimination and the withdrawal of funding for disability benefits.

In contrast, the *World Health Organization International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) (2001*) offers a different understanding of the biopsychosocial model. Shakespeare et al. (2017:34) argue that this version of the model offers a 'multi-factoral, multi-dimensional approach to disability' and acknowledges the complexities of an individual's biological, psychological and social factors with her/his physical and social environment which may limit her/his activity and participation which may, in turn, impede her/his flourishing. In this vein, the biopsychosocial model of understanding autism does not ignore the difficulties that the individual may experience or suffer due to her/his biological or psychological disposition or view disabling factors as mainly being caused by external environmental factors as is the focus of the social model. Rather, according to Goodley (2014), it considers that disability occurs when an individual is deprived of practical opportunities in the physical, economic, social, political and cultural aspects of life as a result

of biological impairment and societal attitudes and traditions set by those in power in a society. It is not a perfect model of understanding disability as can be seen from the argument given by Shakespeare et al. above.

Alternatively, Anderson-Chavarria (2021) argues that autism is best understood as a 'predicament' allowing the acknowledgement of the infinite variability of individual autism experiences, both positive and negative resulting from the individual's social and environmental context and the variability of experiences between autistic people in the same social context and environment. This is because, she claims, it understands disability to be biologically based and sociologically constructed, where functioning differently from the accepted social norm can be made restrictive and it does not have a typical type of functioning in mind. Anderson-Chavarria (2021) states that the predicament model

> … does not demand those experiencing these situations to choose a side: deficit or societal oppression and/or exclusion. Instead, it allows for nuance, complexity, and individualized experience. (Anderson-Chavarria, 2021:14)

This model, she suggests, may provide new opportunities for positive identity building and representation for the autism community and I am in broad agreement with this. However, as a dyspraxic myself, I feel uncomfortable with the term 'predicament' as for me it has a negative connotation. The Cambridge dictionary defines the word as 'an unpleasant or confusing situation that is difficult to get out of or solve'. In some respects, this may pertain if I am in an environment that prevents me from functioning effectively, for example, a noisy environment. However, the whole of my life is not a series of unpleasant or embarrassing situations. Many of my life experiences are pleasant and empowering. For example, I am empathetic and creative and this enables me to find solutions to problems some other teachers find difficult to solve. In such situations, I do not consider myself to be in a 'predicament'. I argue that the biopsychosocial and predicament models consider the individual's unique

disposition and the inter-relatedness, complexities and nuances of being autistic for the reasons described above. With this in mind, I prefer to use the term biopsychosocial model as I feel it incorporates an acknowledgement of an individual's strengths with a neutral connotation. However, it should be noted that this is my personal preference which may be different for other people and I recognize that no language is neutral when discussing disability and neurodiversity. As the biopsychosocial model recognizes that a person's strengths and needs are particular to the individual and her/his context and environment and are complex in nature, in this respect for the purposes of this Dissertation within an educational context, I argue, it sits well with the Capabilities Approach and I will now explain why.

The Capabilities Approach is a philosophical theoretical framework that was first set out by the economist-philosopher Amartya Sen (1974; 1979a; 1979b) in his series of academic articles in which he criticizes the limited informational bases of traditional economic models of philosophy and evaluative accounts such as utilitarianism which will be discussed in the next chapter. The Capabilities Approach makes two normative claims. The freedom to achieve well-being and flourishing is of fundamental importance and the freedom to achieve well-being and flourishing is to be comprehended in terms of people's capabilities, that is the opportunities afforded a person to be and do what they have reason to value. Moreover, according to Sen (1992), the Capabilities Approach is generally considered to be a flexible framework that is multi-purpose rather than a precise theory of well-being that can be applied to any context in a society. Sen is concerned with the idea of the definition of poverty in its widest sense, that is not merely economic poverty, the deprivation of the capability to live a good life, but the deprivation of opportunity and resources in all aspects of life. He also argues in *The Idea of Justice* (2009) that the term 'development' may be defined as the

expansion of capability or opportunity. Further, Sen acknowledges that reality is complex and that any evaluation should reflect that complexity and contextualisation.

Martha Nussbaum worked with Sen on the Capabilities Approach and developed it further, influenced by the ideas of Aristotle, Kant and Marx. Nussbaum (2006a) is concerned with a coherent normative, partial theory of justice that can be contextualised according to the individual's own circumstances. It is a partial theory of justice because it may be developed further by individuals, philosophers, governments and societies as they evolve as she states at the end of *Frontiers of Justice*: 'I have not shown [that] extension of sentiment required by the normative project of this book is possible' (Nussbaum, 2006a:414). This space for individual contextualisation and flexibility for development, I will argue throughout the rest of this Dissertation, is key for the inclusion and support of high-functioning autistic learners who have a different way of thinking and being, an understanding of which is undergoing continuous and developing research. Moreover, the Capabilities Approach, according to Nussbaum (2006a), focuses on transformative change in what a person may be and do, enabling flourishing or leading a life realising one's full potential, improving self-esteem and reducing stigma. Following Nussbaum (2006a), two components of being human and the capacity to flourish are functioning and capability. 'Functionings' are a person's various states of being in different situations and contexts and the activities in which a person is involved, such as being fed. Capabilities, on the other hand, are a person's real freedoms or opportunities to develop her/his functionings, focusing on empowerment but also on the material conditions and environment that enable people to live fuller lives. For instance, while going to class is a functioning, the opportunity to learn is the corresponding capability, the opportunity that the classroom teacher provides for the learners to learn in the classroom.

However, the notion of capabilities is also complex, so now I will turn now to Nussbaum's concept of combined capabilities.

Combined Capabilities

In the case of a high-functioning autistic learner, or for that matter learners with other or co-occurring cognitive differences such as ADHD or dyspraxia, s/he is cognitively and physically capable of achievement in the classroom. However, because of a lack of awareness and assumptions made by non-autistic people and because of stigma, social arrangements and a learning environment that is geared towards the majority non-autistic people, the high-functioning autistic person is put in a position of what Nussbaum (2006a; 2006b) would term 'combined capability'. Combined capabilities are the internal capabilities or characteristics of a person, that is her/his personality traits, intellectual and emotional and perceptual capacities and physical health and fitness in combination with the social, political, economic and cultural conditions of her/his life. So, an educational environment looking to enhance human capabilities should attempt to enhance a person's internal capabilities and also adapt the external conditions, in this case the learning environment in a way that is capabilities-enhancing.

Moreover, it is important to note that in the case of high-functioning cognitive differences, exclusion and discrimination may be subtle and persistent. Nussbaum (2009;345) argues that people who easily become confused or fearful in a new setting, as many autistic people do, may be excluded in the classroom *de facto* even though sensitive thought about how to include them may have occurred. I contend that this may be due to conscious and unconscious bias (discussed in Chapter Four), stemming from ignorance, a lack of awareness of the nature of autism, and assumptions made by others relying on their own social norms

and parameters as accepted by the majority to make judgements about high-functioning autistic people's perceived behaviour. A culture shift, a change in outlook and self-awareness is required and so I argue that teachers who are non-judgemental, aware of their own biases and are prepared to listen, can ensure that, in the classroom, each individual leads a life worthy of the type of human dignity that Nussbaum advocates. However, because of the miscomprehension of high-functioning autism, which is my second main concern as outlined in the introductory chapter, there is a danger that individual dignity is ignored, so it is to Nussbaum's concept of dignity that I now turn.

Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (2006a) begins with a concept of the dignity of the human being and of a life worthy of that dignity, that is a life that has available in it truly human functioning. The Capabilities Approach promotes a concept of dignity in which rationality and autonomy are not the only capacities pertinent to a person's dignity: there must be a capacity for love, play and other activities, which are characteristically human. Nussbaum argues that:

> Full and equal human dignity is possessed by any child of human parents who has any of an open-ended disjunction of basic capabilities for major human life activities … some of whom are capable of love and care but not of reading and writing, some of whom are capable of reading and writing but severely challenged in the area of social interaction. (Nussbaum, 2008:363)

Each person may have these capacities to one degree or another in her/his own individual context. This approach allows an individual's strengths and needs to be identified, strengths and needs that may lie outside cognition and the formulations of academia, widening the definition of achievement and what it means to humanly function. Moreover, in the context of the Capabilities Approach, the complexities of functionings and capabilities can be addressed by a personal assessment of disability to account for the personal and environmental factors that lead people to achieve transformative change and flourishing. If

disability is defined in terms of a deprivation of capabilities, then one can select a set of relevant capabilities to form an evaluative space. Nussbaum (2006a:76-77) provides such a set through a list of ten central capabilities that may be used to make informed life decisions. The list is an account of minimum core social entitlements that may serve as a threshold framework upon which to base a life worthy of human dignity and is compatible with differing views about justice and distribution allowing for individual and community contextualisation. The list of capabilities covers every aspect of a person's life and ranges from the basic - for example, nutrition, housing and health, to the complex such as self-respect, self-image and happiness. All ten capabilities are important in this Dissertation but the capability of affiliation (Nussbaum, 2006a:77) is, in particular, central to this work.

> Affiliation.
> B. Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified human being whose worth is equal to that of others. (Nussbaum, 2006a:77)

This is related to non-discrimination because equality of capability is a key goal. The absence of such equality would be connected with a deficit in dignity and self-respect born out of people's attitudes emanating from ignorance, stigma and fear, which I will discuss in Chapter Four. Importantly, the Capabilities Approach[1] addresses a wider range of issues than employability skills, academic qualifications, independence, and economic security. Moreover, the Capabilities Approach allows attention to the attitudes and assumptions of others towards high-functioning autistic people and this is at the heart of this Dissertation because, I will argue, it is through interaction with others that people can lead a dignified, valued and flourishing life and it is to this I now turn.

[1] From here I will use the Capabilities Approach to refer to Nussbaum's version unless I indicate otherwise.

Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach envisages human beings as co-operating from a large range of motives additional to mutual advantage which include justice and compassion for those who have less than they need to lead dignified and flourishing lives. I argue in accordance with Nussbaum that education can make ties in relationships more profound and equitable through working relationships of trust based on the emotions of empathy and compassion, as these types of relationships acknowledge respect and dignity and value the individual, both the learner and the teacher. A lack of acknowledgement and understanding or empathy towards the autistic learner and indeed autistic staff and the way they think and react are, in my view, a form of exclusion. By ignoring a person who happens to be emotionally misunderstood by non-autistic people, society is losing out on citizens who may improve their own and other's flourishing by presenting their own unique positionality and perspective on the world at whatever level they are functioning at. Additionally, autistic people who are highly competent, productive and creative and who might change the world for the better may also be overlooked because they function in a different way socially and emotionally. In this way, I argue, in agreement with Nussbaum, that one's own flourishing is bound up in the flourishing others. These arguments will be developed further in Chapter Five.

Furthermore, Nussbaum (2006a) asserts that the role of caring or guardianship should not be considered as dealing with the incompetence or deficit of a person, as in the medical model of remedial support within a fixed learning environment and education system. Rather caring and guardianship should be a way of facilitating that person's access to all of the ten central capabilities, with the aim of achieving equality of opportunity for all. Accordingly, the role of the teacher may be to act as a facilitating guardian and role model who can help guide the learner when developing all kinds of relationships and help them avoid the pitfalls, and

navigate the challenges, of human relationships. Nussbaum seeks to provide an answer to the political and ethical challenge of taking care of and protecting humans as embodied, vulnerable human beings on both legislative and institutional levels in the creation of legislation and policy applied to an individual's context. For high-functioning autistic learners in the classroom, this may mean developing understanding and empathy so that strategies may be developed that suit an individual's emotional and social needs within their own individual context. This way, s/he may not be constantly afraid that s/he is always misinterpreting and getting social interactions wrong, that s/he is not the butt of everyone's jokes or perceived as odd, a trouble-maker or even stupid in the classroom, or as someone who can be easily frustrated. Instead, the learner may be viewed as a valued, dignified and respected fully-functioning member of the class community with much to contribute to it.

Moreover, the Capabilities Approach would be critical of the belief of some that high-functioning autistic people have limitations that are predetermined, as some diagnoses tend to imply, and that adjustment of aspirations downwards is the safest way forward. Instead, it promotes the idea of an evolving, social and political being who, given the right environment, resources and support, can flourish in every aspect of her/his life. Thus, through the Capabilities Approach a person's biological and psychological make-up and socio-cultural environment, as in the biopsychosocial model, would be taken into consideration when planning the support and inclusion of autistic learners in the classroom. Additionally, the Capabilities Approach advocates a substantive freedoms approach to human flourishing that emphasizes agency, the exercise of self-determination. Consequently, applying the lens of the Capabilities Approach would encourage critical reflection upon SEND policy and support programmes that focus on impairments rather than on an individual's strengths and talents,

with a sustained concern regarding the social and cultural context that enables or hinders a person to convert resources and rules into real opportunities.

In summary, the Capabilities Approach is an ethical framework that fits well with a bio-psychosocial model of viewing autism because it takes into consideration an individual's unique biological, psychological and social disposition and context and is concerned with providing a person with the right type of resources and opportunities to be able to make informed life decisions in order to flourish. It also focuses on a person's unique dignity, which is bound up with a person's vulnerability and a view that, by acknowledging and sharing one's own vulnerability, one can develop one's own flourishing and the flourishing of others.

Furthermore, Nussbaum (2006a:415) argues that her list of central capabilities nurtures imaginative courage without which ' … we are likely to be left with public cynicism and despair …' This is pertinent to overcoming the challenges of inclusion. As a partial theory of social justice, it is not about full equality of capabilities but is about reducing inequalities of capabilities. As such the capabilities list should be viewed as a starting point, to be critically reviewed so that it evolves and adapts to the individual's needs and desires over time. I, therefore, do not posit that the Capabilities Approach is an absolute and immediate answer for inclusion, but it may be an appropriate theoretical framework from which to develop and improve the meaning of inclusion within my own and others' contexts and in SEND education legislation policy and practice. It may also contribute to further research and the work of other professionals in a similar context within the area of SEND. To see how this may be applied and to contrast the values of the Capabilities Approach which have been discussed in this chapter, in Chapter Three I will discuss the current SEND policy landscape

and the neoliberal, utilitarian, standardised and meritocratic education system within which it resides.

Chapter Three: Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) current landscape.

> I didn't realise that I tended to see people as a means to an end, rather than as ends unto themselves. And that really, all of us are human *beings*, and were never meant to be merely human *doings* … I suspect that departments of education throughout the world really struggle with those attitudes towards our children. When making policy, that is the lens through which they make sense of their decisions.
>
> *Don't Send Him in Tomorrow*, Foreward,
> Father Timothy Novis, Chaplain Wellington College, (2016:4).

The above epigraph encapsulates my argument in this chapter, that learners are seen as a utilitarian means to an end to establish and maintain state economic security rather than being valued as unique and dignified individuals. Although national economic security is, of course, important to ensure the survival of society, it brings with it a set of fundamental ethical problems if this is the exclusive driver of education. This addresses my first concern, that is that the current neoliberal agenda of a standardised and commodified education system creates a pressurised, tense and anxiety-inducing classroom environment. In the introductory chapter of this Dissertation, and discussed again in Chapter Four, I give an account of the struggles and challenges for both high-functioning autistic learners and subject teachers in the classroom that I have observed and that the students who I teach have reported to me in my daily work as Head of Additional Learning Support and Inclusion. I argue that these struggles and tensions are not just a result of spontaneous incidents in the classroom but are intensified by the underlying external tensions and influences of current education policy in England. I contend that these policies view the learner as an economic investment in the future, a utilitarian means to an end for the greater good as described in the epigraph above, and that this puts both the learner and the teacher under pressure. The policies creating the backdrop to teaching in the classroom may be well-intentioned, but they may also have a negative effect on emotional and social factors affecting the individual, resulting in a lack of inclusiveness. Building on the last chapter, in this chapter, I will argue that education should

be about viewing the learner as a dignified, unique individual who has the potential to flourish, and who has a distinct contribution to make to both the classroom and the wider community as a fully included citizen. Learners should not be a commodified means to an end to secure the country's economic functioning. In this respect, I argue that Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, as outlined in the previous chapter, is a suitable alternative to the current neoliberal education framework and so it is through the lens of the Capabilities Approach that I will evaluate current SEND policy and legislation in England.

This chapter is in three parts. In the first part, I will outline the current Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) legislation and educational policy landscape for English sixth form colleges. Starting with the Equality Act 2010 and the Children and Families Act 2014, I will describe how these pieces of legislation aim to acknowledge and consolidate the needs and rights of individuals with SEND. I will then discuss the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice: 0-25 Years 2015, which offers authoritative guidance on the implementation of the aforementioned Acts, and which outlines a prescribed methodology for identifying, assessing and providing support for children and young adults with learning differences and disabilities. In the second part of this chapter, I will argue that this legislation and policy of its implementation are rooted in the value system of a neoliberal education system based on funding, seeking value for money, and following authoritarian, utilitarian and efficiency-driven Benthamite thinking. I will discuss the underlying values of our current education system that favour the standardisation and meritocracy prescribed in Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon model for education. Finally, in the third part of this chapter, and using the Capabilities Approach as an analytical lens, I contend that there is a disparity between the principle of inclusion underlying SEND legislation and policy and the practical application and consequences of deploying the legislation in a neoliberal value system for

two main reasons. Firstly, I argue that because of the legacy of standardisation and meritocracy, the neoliberal value system focuses on one type of exclusive thinking and being rather than acknowledging and embracing diverse ways of thinking and being that would include high-functioning autistic learners. Secondly, I argue that the neoliberal educational framework is based on reciprocal social contracts between people that assume that each has the same starting point in life, capabilities and opportunities to flourish and successfully compete in a meritocratic society. For this, I will turn to a discussion of social contract theory and its legacy today. However, I will start by outlining and discussing the provision of the Equality Act 2010.

The Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 in England replaced and combined previous anti-discrimination legislation including the Disability Discrimination Act (1995), the Race Relations Act (1965), and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) into one single Act, with the aim of making the law easier to understand and strengthening the protection of the rights of certain groups in society considered to be vulnerable. According to www.gov.uk (2020), the Equality Act (2010) provides the basic framework of protection against direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation in services and public functions such as employment, education and transport. It covers a list of nine protected characteristics: gender, gender reassignment, sex, sexual orientation, race, age, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, belief or religion and disability. In addition to the protection against discrimination, the provisions relating directly to disability include harmonising thresholds for the duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people in their working environment, extending the protection against harassment of employees and against discrimination when applying for jobs or a place at a college or university. Under the Equality Act 2010, the definition of a

disability is a ‘substantial’ or ‘long term’ impairment that lasts or is expected to last more than twelve months and has a negative effect on the capacity to carry out normal daily activities, for both physical and mental impairments.

Additionally, in 2014, in line with the Equality Act 2010, Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) educational reform in England was revolutionised and it is due to be reviewed further in the near future. The Children and Families Act Part 3 (2014) shifted the emphasis for support from the purely academic to a more integrated, holistic system of support which was to include the assessment, planning and reviewing of support for learners. Its aim was to create a person-centred approach to the identification of need and the provision of support, giving young people or for younger children their parents or guardians, more autonomy and choice. A document providing guidance for the implementation of this new legislation based on the Children and Families Act Part 3 (2014) and the Equality Act (2010) and best practice for professionals across education sectors and parents or guardians was produced: the SEND Code of Practice: 0-25 Years 2014, updated in 2015. It describes the duties of local authorities and the education sector and explains that local authorities must involve families, children and young adults in discussions and decisions relating to their care and education; and provide impartial advice, support and mediation services and so it is to the SEND Code of Practice: 0-25 Years 2015, hereafter referred to as the SEND CoP 2015 that I now turn.

The SEND Code of Practice 0-25 Years 2015

The SEND CoP 2015, offers guidance on the implementation of the Equality Act 2010, the Children and Families Act 2014 part 3 and Education Health and Care (EHC) plans, the latter of which I will discuss later in this chapter in schools and colleges. It includes a description

of the statutory duties of local authorities, schools and colleges for the education and support of learners with SEND as well as examples of good practice. Moreover, the SEND CoP (2015:10) emphasises the need for a graduated approach to support, which is defined as 'a model of action and intervention' for children and young adults with SEND in educational settings in the form of assess, plan, do, review. The approach acknowledges that there is a continuum of SEND, that the individual needs of the SEND learner are evolving, and that increasing specialist expertise should be brought to bear on the difficulties that a child or young person may be experiencing. Support may take the form of individual specialist teacher support sessions, in-class support with a learning support assistant (LSA), small group support, and assistive technology as well as other therapies such as counselling or Speech and Language Therapy (SALT). Some of these services may be facilitated by external professionals such as a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) therapist. Learners may also be allocated a personal allowance and funding for transport.

One of the major features of the SEND CoP 2015 is that it states that the special educational needs of the majority of children and young adults will normally be met by mainstream classroom teachers through high quality teaching skills known as Quality First Teaching (QTF) (SEND CoP 2015:19). This approach is stipulated across the board in current policy, legislation, guidance and resource tools and originates in the Department for Children, Schools and Families' (DCSF) *Personalised Learning – A Practical Guide*, published in 2008 in which QTF is defined as follows:

> … highly focused lesson design with sharp objectives; high demands of pupil involvement and engagement with their learning; high levels of interaction for all pupils; appropriate use of teacher questioning, modelling and explaining; an emphasis on learning through dialogue, with regular opportunities for pupils to talk both individually and in groups; an expectation that pupils will accept responsibility for their own learning and work independently and regular use of encouragement and authentic praise to engage and motivate pupils. (DSCF, 2008:145)

Dockrell *et al*. (2020:12) argue that this type of support 'patch[es] up the system' and relates to class teachers' current stress and the SEND CoP 2015's demands that they should take on a greater role in the first line response to children and young people's SEND. They also contend that this type of support demands that teachers have the necessary competencies and that therefore there should be additional teachers' "thinking time" as they are already having to cope with keeping up with the pace of a revised curriculum and staffing cuts. This will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

Moreover, there is a supposition here that every learner is capable of accepting responsibility for her/his own learning and can work independently and so the suggestion that the majority of SEND needs can be met by QFT is somewhat ironic. This echoes the assumption that Nussbaum (2006a) claims that Rawls makes in his social contract about citizens having the capacity to be independent and free when making decisions and I return to this later in this chapter. Learners with SEND may find it difficult to work independently so it is rather ironic to suggest that the majority of SEND needs can be met by QFT. If QFT were to be inclusive of autistic learners, it would have to re-visit the notion that every learner is independent and capable of taking responsibility for his or her own learning. Furthermore, it would need to move away from an understanding of a person with a standardized set of capacities and one way of thinking and processing and, instead, recognize individuality and the ways in which individual needs may be met for all learners to flourish.

Ignoring individuality prevents the development of creative and divergent thinking. Robinson (2015) suggests that very young children are really good at thinking outside the box, they are alternative thinkers, yet by the time they reach teenage years they have largely lost this capacity, because it has been 'educated' out of them through an education system of

standardisation, constant assessment and compliance. Additionally, Hellawell (2015) argues that the neoliberal approach to education puts the classroom teacher at the forefront of responsibility and accountability for learners with SEND while many teachers feel ill-prepared and scared, especially those who are newly qualified with little experience to draw upon.

There also appears to be no consideration in policy texts of how the support of learners with SEND might work in the classroom apart, perhaps, from a list of generic suggested support strategies cut and pasted into support plans not truly tailored to the complexities of the whole person and the needs of the individual. This can leave teachers and learners in a complex predicament in which misunderstandings and confusions may have detrimental effects on both learners and teachers. Classroom teachers may lose confidence, feel pressurised and think they have been denied ownership of their profession as a teacher and in their classrooms. Furthermore, Day *et al*. (2006:613) argue that 'professional identity and moral integrity are challenged by policy changes, parents or colleagues in light of unrealistic expectations. As teachers are expected to take on pre-formulated roles in the government's SEND policy, teachers' emotional identities may become restrained and negative emotions, including feeling vulnerable and uncertain, may be experienced. I have noticed in my own working context that when people feel pressurized, they often appear to be anxious, which may result in anger, an emotion, that according to Jha et al. (2020) argue is characterized by antagonism towards someone perceived to be responsible for their own suffering. Jha et al. (2020) also suggest that anxiety is a reaction to not feeling in control of oneself or one's surroundings and may encompass a tension or fear about an uncertain future event or disposition, resulting in the body being on high alert, which may then result in a defensive, angry outburst. According to Golden et al. (2016), these complex emotions may be both

conscious and unconscious, especially when one finds anxiety and anger frightening. For example, as Head of Additional Learning Support and Inclusion, I often have discussions with parents who are angry and aggressive because they have received a letter from a subject teacher about their child's lack of attendance. More often than not, they say that they are worried that their child will be excluded from the college. This fear of exclusion appears to be at the root of their anxiety which is often manifested by defensive and aggressive language and tone, as when they are reassured that their child will not be excluded, they become calm.

When emotions such as these are felt by both learner and teacher and these emotions ride high in the classroom, the learning environment may become an arena for confrontational situations. This will be discussed further in Chapter Four, but for now I turn to the main document for the support and inclusion for learners considered to have a high level of needs: The Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan administered to each learner that meets the criteria to be awarded one.

The Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan

The Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan is a document intended to support children, young people, and their families from birth to 25 years of age, carrying with it a funding allocation for the support of a child or young person. If a child or young adult has a diagnosis or has SEND needs that warrant more specialised support than the subject teacher can provide, s/he may be awarded such a plan which is issued and maintained by a local authority. The EHC plan, which is reviewed annually identifies four broad areas of support to address the needs of every aspect of a person's functioning: communication and interaction; cognition and learning; social, emotional and mental health (SEMH); and physical and sensory needs (SEND Code of Practice, 2015). At the assessment stage, schools and colleges

are required to analyse the learner's needs using information and data from formal assessments, attainment, experience and behaviour in comparison with their non-disabled peers, in this context, non-autistic peers and national data. In order to obtain an EHC plan, a high-functioning autistic learner has to be consistently 'significantly underperforming compared to their able-bodied peers' (SEND Code of Practice 2015:21). This statement implies a medical, deficit approach, as described in Chapter Two, and it could be argued that there is an ableist assumption of striving towards a normative definition of what it means to be a fully functioning human. Goodley (2014:32) suggests that, from an ableist viewpoint, a valued citizen of the twenty first century is, by definition, cognitively, socially and emotionally able and competent. Additionally, he suggests that cultures value mobility, hearing, speaking and seeing people with bodily control and comportment and that a citizen is 'self- sufficient and self-governing, reasonable and law-abiding and able to compete with the rest of society' (2014:32). This ableist attitude is, according to Goodley (2014:32) potentially dangerous as it nurtures an 'insatiable desire' to improve on what are perceived as the limitations of humanity, devaluing those who are judged not to be intelligent, fit or able-bodied according to prescribed parameters and ignoring the possibility of different but equally valid ways of thinking and being. In the classroom, this is dangerous as it promotes ignorance, unconscious bias as described later in this chapter, and discrimination.

Furthermore, the SEND CoP (2015:112) also stipulates the duty to admit a young person if the institution is named in an EHC plan. Young people have the right to request that an institution be named in their EHC plan and local authorities have a duty to name that institution in the EHC plan unless, following consultation with that institution, the local authority determines that that particular educational setting is not suitable for the young person's age, capacity or aptitude, or that the young person would be 'incompatible with the

efficient use of resources or the efficient education of others'(SEND CoP, 2015:112). This places efficiency and value for money rather than the individual at the forefront of provision, viewing the person with SEND as a commodity arguably not of equal value as a person without SEND. This statement from the SEND CoP (2015), highlights an asymmetry of power between individuals, placing an autistic person in a position of subordination and indignity. I argue that the rhetoric throughout the SEND CoP (2015) echoes the competitive and meritocratic language of current general educational policy in England and may lead those who do not fit a standardised or socially accepted profile of what it means to be fully human feel unequal. Subsequently, O'Brien (2016) argues.

> Our main achievement for this group has been to build a soul-destroying bureaucracy that drains professionals, frustrates parents and patronises children. (O'Brien, 2016:9)

Nussbaum (2009:339) talks of capability-adequacy as opposed to capability-equality. She argues that competition, in this context high-functioning autistic learners being measured against their non-high-functioning autistic peers through standardised data, may make people feel unequal. This is a sign of unequal dignity and as education is an area so central to what Nussbaum (2009:339) terms as 'matters of citizenship and self-respect' that a threshold that everyone is expected to reasonably meet, should not be the end goal for a person with a learning difference such as high-functioning autism. Nussbaum (2009) argues that each person is dignified in their own right because of their own uniqueness and that, by using the list of ten capabilities mentioned in the previous chapter, all citizens may be brought above an 'ample threshold' as a minimum which may then be developed according to the individual's functioning, capability and context. The goals in the EHC plan should then focus on equalizing and protecting the dignity of the individual in her/his own context rather than offering mechanistic goals that require learners to perform academically at the same level as their peers without an EHC plan. However, this would not mean ignoring support

mechanisms for academic achievement. I argue that if the EHC plan is to be truly person centred, then it needs to consider the complexity of the individual's situation on a social and emotional level and how this complexity interacts with the learner's cognition and communication skills. This includes self-esteem in every aspect of the individual's life and how that interacts with the learner's academic performance instead of bifurcating characteristics, strengths and needs into mechanistic norms-based lists attached to funding.

The EHC plan contains a list of the learner's strengths, needs, desired outcomes and provision to be put in place in order to obtain learning outcomes and achieve life goals. One problem is that the EHC plan outcomes focus on measuring progress through academic achievement and standardised numerical data. Emotional, social and communication skills and mental well-being cannot be measured numerically because, by their very nature, they are subjective and unquantifiable. Furthermore, the four areas of need are treated as separate categories. As a result, and partly because of the unquantifiability noted, the complex connections and interactions between the learner's mind and her/his sociological and emotional context are often ignored. For example, if a learner suffers from anxiety, categorised under the section 'Social, Emotional and Mental Health', this may be regarded as separate from the learner's communication needs. Several local authority case workers have argued with me that a high-functioning autistic learner cannot experience anxiety as s/he has not received a separate diagnosis of anxiety disorder. I argue that this is a misunderstanding of the nature of autism. Of course, a learner may be high-functioning autistic and have anxiety disorder as a co-occurring condition but, in my teaching experience, the learner's anxiety is often linked to communication difficulties, which can make situations anxiety ridden with the anxiety exacerbating communication difficulties. Yet in in my experience, in the many EHC plans that I have read anxiety and communication needs are treated as if they

are unconnected. This results in the learner being taught strategies to overcome communication difficulties and difficulties with anxiety in a mechanistic way. For example, the learner is given a script of set sentences to memorise and use in a given context in, say, a speech and language therapy session. The learner is also given strategies to cope with anxiety in a counselling session, yet the complex connection between the communication difficulties as a cause of anxiety is not made. This may be compounded by processing difficulties. As a result, not realising that the communication difficulty may be a cause of any anxiety experienced, the learner may have difficulty knowing when it is appropriate to use the strategies taught in therapy sessions in the classroom or in other real-life situations and s/he may have less of an understanding of her/himself.

I have observed that if the triggers of anxiety are removed from a situation, the learner's capacity to communicate often improves. Opportunities such as day trips provide a generalised learning environment in which the learner can practise the strategies taught to eliminate anxiety triggers and improve communication skills with other learners, staff and members of the public. In this way, skills taught in a clinical setting such as individual speech and language therapy can be transferred to general real-life situations and can be taught gradually. This way, autistic learners may be able to communicate more effectively and become more confident as they will know when they can use certain strategies and over time it may become second nature to them.

Moreover, local authorities should recognise the importance of providing real-world learning opportunities outside the classroom in order to consolidate and expand strategies taught in the classroom when creating outcome-based plans for learners rather than following pre-determined paths set up for high-functioning autistic learners by the standardised education

system. The House of Commons Education Committee (2019) in their report *Special Educational Needs and Disabilities: First Report of Session 2019* describes inconsistent outcomes for learners across local authorities due to variations in the way the legislation is interpreted. Fortunately, and according to Roberts (2018), inspectoral bodies such as Ofsted have recognised that they have over-relied on data to make decisions and that data may be unreliable and even fabricated. Evidence, suggests Roberts (2018) should be taken from a range of sources including talking to learners to find out how well their teacher knows their strengths, needs, learning styles and how they communicate. Harford (2018) suggests that talking to learners has become a recent method of assessment for Ofsted in order to gather evidence with a focus on the learners' journey through the curriculum, but my colleagues across the education sector and myself observe that there is still a main focus on the curriculum being the main measure of success rather than the holistic education of the learner. Moreover, inspectors still look at results and data first and then speak to learners to gather evidence for the results rather than using learner feedback as a measurement for success in itself. The overreliance on hard data speaks of a lack of academic and moral integrity, especially when referring to the support and progress of high-functioning autistic learners who do not fit into a standardised profile of a successful learner according to norms. The insistence on measurable, numerical outcomes and data, unless communicated with purpose and rectitude, will not serve to create any kind of inclusive education system. It remains to be seen if Ofsted will in fact, continue to develop the search for other types of evidence but, if they do, then those learners that do not fit within a standardised formula of success, including high-functioning autistic learners may have their voices heard.

Additionally, Sales and Vincent (2018) argue that issues relating to funding, family resources and some cases viewed as higher profile work against the aim of ensuring a consistent and

transparent EHC planning process. The EHC plan is centred around funding and the provision prescribed in the EHC plans, which is often out of date and, according to *The London SEND Post-16 Review* carried out by the research company Mime commissioned by the Department for Education (2019:45), can vary in quality from one local authority to another with the largest provision being Speech and Language Therapy (SALT). Many SALT therapy organizations compete with each other to gain contracts with the National Health Service (NHS) and local authorities. For example, Wright-Turner (2016:1), in her report for the Cabinet Member for Children and Education – Councillor Sue Macmillan: *Speech and Language Therapy Service Level Agreement Extensions 2015-16 for the Local Authority of Hammersmith and Fulham,* concluded that time extensions were required to support the 'completion of a joint competitive procurement process between the Local Authority and NHS for provision of speech and language services'. A person's needs are then in danger of becoming commodified as according to the report, the local authority will look for best value for money. With such a focus on economic factors, there is a danger that there will be an emphasis on what level of service can be provided to an individual rather than how a person's individual needs may be comprehensively met by a service. The support plan then is not about ensuring the needs and desires of the learner are met but what the service can provide for the learner within its available resources. By services competing with each other, there is also a danger that corruption between local authorities and private businesses may occur, putting at risk the support and resources needed for the individual. Moreover, as many services are recruited from privatised sources that can be expensive, resources for the support of learners can become stretched. For example, a learner may require daily in-class support from a Learning Support Assistant (LSA), but the EHC plan might state that the learner also needs the termly input of a SALT therapist, who is often a private practitioner subcontracted by the local authority. It has been the case that the college in which I work has been charged

almost a thousand pounds for three annual sessions from a SALT therapist and so the local authority refused to pay out more funding for the learner, not leaving enough funding for the daily LSA support. Consequently, the needs of the learner have not been met.

Ironically, I have often noticed that the standardised format of recruiting a therapist according to the dictates of the EHC plan is often not fit for purpose as they often do not identify the changing needs of the learner. Annual reviews carried out by Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Co-ordinators (SENDCos) in schools and colleges identify and address these changing needs but these changes are often, in my experience, not carried over to the EHC plan by the local authority, and so they do not ensure the value for money or the efficiency that the SEND CoP 2015 and neoliberal educational framework strive to achieve. One reason for this may be because strategies offered by therapists, for example, SALT therapy for learners that I work with have often not been age appropriate or are skills taught in a mechanistic therapy or classroom setting and so the learner finds it difficult to transfer those skills to other situations and contexts. Moreover, according to the report carried out by Mime (2019), confirmed a wide variation in provision of support in local authorities, including:

> … considerable variability between local authorities in the format and quality of content of EHCPs… Overall, more than half of the EHCPs reviewed lacked a clear focus on Preparing for Adulthood outcomes … the [EHCP] commissioning process is complex, yet commissioners and providers often lack local intelligence on upcoming demand … (Mime, 2019:4)

In this respect, the system is set up not to address the wants and needs of the individual but what a particular service can offer that individual. I contend that this is, at least partly, due the standardised, tick box approach towards support and inclusion for autistic learners. Such learners are viewed with a list of needs for which generic strategies are offered rather than focusing on providing opportunities for interaction, improving learning experiences both

inside and outside the classroom, and providing resources for the person to develop and flourish.

Additionally, the SEND CoP (2015:113) aims to address learners' needs and provide support on a wide variety of programmes and states that colleges should 'be ambitious for young people with SEN' and progress to positive destinations in life such as employment and study in Higher Education. Areas of focus are training, employability skills, independence, good health and participating in the community. In my view, this rhetoric focused on training and employability rather misses the point and so overlooks the need to nurture the whole person as a critical and divergent thinker. Moreover, the phrase 'participation in the community' is ambiguous, complex and problematic. Firstly, because there are various definitions of the term 'community' this has inevitable consequences for people with SEND and how inclusion in the community is perceived. For instance, there are communities as physical territories and communities of identity. These two types of community are based on very different criteria and yet in the EHC plan there is no clarification of type of community. Secondly, autistic people may be excluded from full citizenship or membership of a community because of inadequate physical resources, attitudinal barriers and expectations about what people can contribute. If a territorial community excludes individuals because of an accepted standardised idea of what it is to be human, defined by the majority of that community or by those in power, then the autistic individual may be excluded.

By their very nature, autistic people do not conform to a standardised norm: their uniqueness is part of the beauty of who they are as divergent thinkers and the dismissal of this amounts to exclusion. Furthermore, participation does not take place in a vacuum, the individual's environment directly affects how much or how little a person can participate. On the other

hand, communities of identity, for example, autistic communities and groups such as Autism Speaks, can be places of solidarity, providing a voice and nurturing. However, depending on the organization's attitude towards autism it may also reinforce the accepted norms of society that may exclude autistic people and contribute to 'othering' or separation from the rest of the territorial community. Furthermore, the phrase 'participating in the community' for high-functioning autistic learners may be perceived to have patronising undertones as 'participation' may imply that the high-functioning autistic person may take part in some form in the community, in a reduced form with only a limited role. This risks not recognizing that the community may be privileged to have the unique contribution of the high-functioning autistic individual as an equal citizen if provided with the most appropriate support. Appropriate types of support and learning opportunities will be discussed later in Chapter Six but a true community, I argue, is one that equitably acknowledges and reflects the diversity of its citizens and members. Democracy may then be threatened if all do not have a voice. I suggest that for true neurodiversity to be acknowledged, there needs to be a shift in culture and in the understanding of the nature of autism and other neurological dispositions such as dyspraxia and ADHD. To examine this, I return now to the SEND Code of Practice (SEND CoP) 2015.

Although an interim review of the SEND CoP 2015 carried out by Lamb *et al*. entitled *An Early Review of the New SEN/Disability Policy and Legislation* (2018:2;10) found that it had a 'positive impact' in achieving a 'decisive shift in culture' to a more learner-centred holistic approach for the education and support of learners with SEND, it also found that further crucial development was needed. Furthermore, Lamb *et al*. (2018:2;10) state that 'implementation [of the new CoP] is moving forward' and that the reforms have generally had a supportive impact on the Special Educational Needs and Disability Co-ordinator's

(SENDCo) role and school practices, but that the reforms should be put in the context of the removal of government funding from local authorities (LAs) and health budgets. LAs have reduced resourcing in some fundamental elements of support provision due to the funding cuts in our economically based education system. A consequence of such cuts can be observed in a survey involving 1,188 school leaders in England carried out by The Key, an educational think tank, in 2016 which found that 89% of school leaders say that cuts in local authority funding have had a detrimental effect on SEND provision. This has resulted in a lack of resources to achieve not only academic outcomes but social and emotional well-being, fundamental to the flourishing of the individual as fewer learning opportunities such as trips can be offered.

Furthermore, hegemonic factors such as the lack of coherent policy and differing practice across local authorities have increased the amount of administration for teachers and staff. Henshaw (2021) argues that an increase in administrative demands has stretched the role of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Co-ordinator (SENDCo) to 'breaking point' and made it more difficult and time consuming to carry out specialist duties diverting precious time away from learners. Consequently, I find myself very restricted having to work within prescribed parameters linked to funding that differs for each local authority when trying to put in place opportunities for learners and be true to the fundamental principle of my vocation as a teacher - to educate the whole person. However, I suggest that it may be difficult for professionals to be aware of the effects of this standardised and commodified approach to support because its conceptual framework is deep rooted in the history of modern education. Hence, I turn now to this history arguing that this approach towards the support and education of high-functioning autistic learners has its foundations in Benthamite thinking and values.

Benthamite thinking: standardisation, meritocracy, authoritarianism and economic security.

Jeremy Bentham was writing at the dawn of the industrial revolution, at a time when the middle-classes were rising and when technology, mass production, and economic advancement were rapidly developing. According to Brown (2015) public institutions including the current education system that favours standardisation, productivity and human capital and aims to maximise the collective well-being of society has its foundations in the Utilitarian model of pedagogy and Benthamite thinking. Bentham strongly believed that education should be more widely available as only the elite classes attended school or university at the time of his writing. However, his understanding of education, which I argue is now deeply embedded in the current model of education, focuses on the training of the skills needed by factory line workers rather than educating and developing the whole person as a thinking, feeling being. Indeed, in his work *Chrestomathia* (1816), Bentham proposes a pedagogical model that is the foundation of the standardised, numerical, meritocratic and emotionally depleted approach to education that exists in England today.

Bentham sets out three aims for his pedagogical model: saving money, saving time, and increasing relative academic aptitude. That is to say, his focus is on ensuring that any educational service is value for money and treats the individual as a means to an end, that is the end of collective happiness of the society in which the individual lives rather than the happiness and flourishing of the individual. The valuing of state economic security over the individual results in the learner becoming a means to the end of producing skilled workers to secure the economic well-being of the country. This endangers the realisation of a learner's value as an individual, and her/his contribution to society as a creative and divergent thinker

may be underestimated or overlooked if s/he does not fit the accepted norm of what it means to be a fully functioning human being with a particular norms-based way of communicating.

In current times, a similar value system pertains. Hutchings (2015:16) in *Exam Factories? The Impact of Accountability Measures on Children and Young People* commissioned by the National Union of Teachers (NUT), states that the perception of Ofsted inspections is 'punitive' and that children and young people increasingly see the main purpose of education as gaining qualifications, as being trained to do a job rather than to think critically, creatively or divergently. The report claims that this is because the focus of schools, universities and employers is on qualifications. Success is measured in terms of economic security, in terms of employability. Furthermore, the drive for economic success and the production of workers with employability skills means that an important element of education, that is to say human relationships, emotional intelligence and divergent thinking are frequently side-lined or ignored. A research report by Donaldson (2015:10) reported that the quality of learner-teacher relationships had been reduced by pressure to cover the syllabus and maintain focus in lessons; lack of time due to consequence of a heavy workload; stress levels and the fact that teachers are pressurising learners to achieve.

In contrast to Bentham, Nussbaum (2006a) follows Kant's assertion that a person is not a means to an end for the greater good of humanity but a dignified end in her/himself, needing to be valued, cared for, respected, educated and supported in the particular way that each individual needs through a range of opportunities and resources. This normative analysis working from the ends (the person) rather than the means (the resource or procedure), has two significant advantages. Firstly, it identifies individual differences, including strengths as well as weaknesses, and contextualises an individual's position. Secondly, the person being

valued as an end in her/himself means that financial and material resources become an instrument to help achieve a person's flourishing rather than her/his acquisition of knowledge or skills for the greater good as the goal. By starting with the person as an end in her/himself, the person is valued for the unique individual that s/he is and the unique contribution that s/he can make and all then may be judged by their own parameters and context rather than by a standardised accepted norm shaped by uniformity. In this way, a person is treated as a dignified and valued human being. The reliance on uniformity can be seen in Bentham's pedagogical model in which the aim is to maximise the efficiency of learning, to ensure value for money, and to establish meritocracy, and it is to this that I now turn.

Uniformity and Authoritarianism

In Bentham's (1787) pedagogical model, the classroom is to operate efficiently with fixed laws: silently, uniformly, increasingly, with inflexible justice. Bentham (1787) further argues that:

> … the more constantly the persons to be inspected are under the eyes of the persons who should inspect them, the more perfectly will the purpose of the establishment have been attained. (Bentham, 1787:40)

Uniformity, discipline, surveillance and efficiency displace creativity, imagination, emotion and trust. Bentham (1787) proposes that this value for money, utilitarian approach to education should be implemented in every aspect of a school's organization. Additionally, he advises that school classes should be taught with large numbers with one scholar-teacher delivering the directions of the subject and a scholar-monitor acting as a teaching assistant and attending exclusively to monitoring the behaviour and compliance of the class. This ensures profit maximization and expense minimization as fewer teachers need to be employed. Bentham (1816:47) acknowledges that one of the main advantages of using the monitoring system of large classes by one teacher is the 'cheapness of the instruction in

proportion to its value'. This concept of value for money has remained in the present system and, in my professional experience, this has resulted in the learner's need for a specialist teacher being overlooked with hard-working Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) being paid lower wages and having to meet the needs of many learners in one classroom. With this in mind, and with a focus on results-driven funding, there is a danger that an educational institution may, for example, try to maximise the number of learners having extra time in examination access arrangements in an attempt to maximise results. These same learners do not really require extra time in examinations as they do not have a learning difficulty or disability that impedes their capacity to learn on a daily basis. This is then unfair on those that do have a learning difficulty or disability as they are not starting on a level playing field if the other learners also receive extra time in examinations. The needs of those learners who really have a learning difference or disability are then devalued. This is compounded by an educational atmosphere of surveillance and accountability which may breed fear and resentment, and that atmosphere's foundation lies in Bentham's Panopticon model, which I will now describe.

Bentham (1787) in his Panopticon or the Inspection House model describes the use of an institutional type of building and a system of control that Bentham proposes is applicable to:

> … any sort of establishment, in which persons of any description are to be kept under inspection; and in particular to … prisons … poor-houses … hospitals … and schools. (Bentham, 1787:xIvi)

Such an environment, Bentham claims, enables learners and teachers to be unwittingly observed or monitored thereby promoting suspicion and distrust. This surveillance-based approach has been adopted by the neoliberal culture of the current education system, for example, through graded lesson observations by senior management and performance related

pay dependent on the results the learners of the teacher have achieved in the preceding three years. Neoliberalism is a political economic theory that rejects government regulation of the economy and focuses on achieving progress and social justice by promoting a free-market economy. According to Brown (2015), neoliberal economics relies on the values of choice and competition rather than equity and sustainability to meet its goals, always searching for value for money. In education, performance learning, managed through close surveillance of both teachers and learners, with observation and evidence gained through numerical data and algorithms influenced by Bentham's panopticon model, is encouraged. According to De Lissovoy and McClaren (2003), performance learning is focused on achieving predetermined accountability goals through methods of surveillance of teachers and their learners rather in preference to a focus on learning possibilities and emotional, social and spiritual self-realisation. Foucault (1977) further argues that accountability schemes, examples of which may be performance related pay or graded lesson observations, are designed to coerce teachers by including self-regulation through surveillance together with the threat of punishing sanctions. Such approaches can undermine the teacher's competence and ownership of their professional identity, risking lowering self-esteem and preventing the development of a dynamic, creative and flexible professional and the flourishing of a person, both professionally and personally.

Similarly, through the enforcement of uniform thinking, rote based learning and a focus on employability skills, a learner's capacity to develop critical and divergent thinking skills, pre-requisites for the development of creativity, will be muted. Having to conform to a standardised way of thinking and being and pitting one learner against the other in competition may have a detrimental effect on an individual's self-esteem, especially if that individual does not fit the accepted standardised model. Distrust and fear of the other may

then take over. When people feel that they are not listened to or cannot be heard and if they have difficulties in expressing themselves, anger and frustration can take over, which may be manifested in the classroom in various ways by both the teacher and the learner. For example, a low mood of the teacher may set the tone for the class and the learner may be anxious and act in a number of negative ways. Also, if a person feels threatened, her/his outlook may become insular and s/he may turn in on themselves in survival mode, resulting in the teacher ignoring the needs of the learner in the classroom and the learner feeling under threat.

Additionally, surveillance, coercion and unequal funding may combine to regulate schools and colleges inequitably. According to Pickett and Wilkinson (2010), schools and colleges with less funding and fewer resources in deprived areas such as inner-cities are expected to produce similar exam results to affluent schools whose families generally have greater economic and educational resources. Furthermore, being surveilled by management particularly in a challenging school or college with few resources in deprived areas where the teacher needs to help learners to navigate daily life, can set a tone of distrust or an unwillingness to collaborate, as the teacher may feel s/he is in competition with her/his colleagues both within and outside the school or college. Translated into the classroom, this pressure to perform to standardisation and punishment via constant surveillance may cause the teacher to feel anxious, which may manifest in defensiveness, short-temperedness, intolerance of perceived disruptive behaviour of learners, and an unwillingness to listen to others. For example, a high-functioning autistic learner feels overwhelmed and needs a sensory break so asks to leave the classroom without explaining to the teacher why she needs to leave because of her communication difficulties. However, there are twenty other learners in the class and the teacher needs to ensure everyone is on task. The learners are loud and keep moving around the classroom. The teacher is trying to maintain effective classroom

management and ensure that the class reach their learning objectives by the end of the lesson so does not let learner leave. The high-functioning autistic learner is, all the time, becoming more desperate. In an attempt to be heard and in an anxious state, the high-functioning autistic learner approaches the teacher and shouts that she needs to leave. The teacher does not take into consideration or understand the anxious feelings of the learner and feels the need to regain control over the class. So, pre-occupied with the lesson outcomes, s/he instructs the learner to sit down. The high-functioning autistic learner, frustrated, in discomfort, and unable to express herself verbally, succumbs to anxiety and pushes the teacher out of the way to leave the room. This results in the teacher, who already feels disrespected by external forces, taking offence at the perceived aggressive behaviour of the learner, with the end result being that the learner is temporarily excluded from the class and a note is placed on her academic file. Had the teacher felt less pressured, and more valued and confident, then s/he might have been prepared to listen and observe, and the calamity might have been avoided. This illustrates the point made in the first chapter: what is perceived as disruptive behaviour by high-functioning autistic learners may actually be a call for help, and this will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter.

My claim is that the constant surveillance of both teachers and learners removes the dignity of the individual and any trust that a learner may have with her/his teacher, because it devalues the human emotional relationship between the teacher and the learner, which will be discussed in Chapter Five. Prisons, the institutions that Bentham used for the blueprint of his Panopticon model, were seen as places of punishment, where people had forfeited their right to freedom. Educational institutions, however, are meant to be places where freedom and informed thinking are explored and developed, so applying the model used for a prison to maximize the efficiency of learning for an educational institution does not make sense unless

the educational institution is also viewed as a place of correction and conditioning rather than nurturing and flourishing.

Maximizing the Efficiency of Learning

Bentham (1816) also proposes guidelines to maximize the efficiency of learning such as the uninterrupted-action principle, with every minute of a learner's time directed towards learning the lesson and no interval between lessons. The pedagogical methods he prescribes are mechanistic: instruction, repetition, drilling and testing, with no recognition of the need to develop the divergent or critical thinking which are key skills for autonomy. Thus, a person is told what to think and how to behave and is to do so without question. Education then becomes a matter of compliance rather than the development of individual human freedom. Additionally, Bentham (1816) proposes a place-setting structure in which learners are placed into groups according to their so-called ability, and this idea marks the dawn of standardisation and setting.

The legacy of Bentham's model is apparent today as, according to Hutchings (2015), there is evidence that standardised high stakes testing results in an improvement in test scores only because teachers focus very closely on training learners to sit examinations. Hutchings (2015:4) contends that test scores do not necessarily represent the learners' overall level of understanding and knowledge but rather serve as a test of memory. Her report also provides anecdotal evidence that learners who have attained high grades at GCSE level find A[dvanced] level (academic) and higher-level vocational courses difficult and stress-inducing, because they do not have the critical and divergent thinking skills necessary for study at this level. Moreover, Hutchings (2015:16) suggests that critical thinking skills are taught as a separate subject not as an integral part of a main subject and development of the

person, so this skill is not internalised effectively. Similarly, Nussbaum (2010:134) argues that 'teaching to the test' marginalises 'the creativity and individuality that mark the best humanistic teaching and learning' and produce an atmosphere of learner passivity and teacher routinization. This passivity and routinization, I would argue, stifles the vital colloquy between the teacher and the learner, as thought and creativity have no opportunity to be demonstrated, explored and developed when spontaneous discussion is side-lined by the acquisition of memorised information needed to cover the demands of the exam board. In this respect, education is doing every learner a disservice, especially learners with a working memory difficulty, as is often the case with high-functioning autistic learners, particularly if they have a co-occurring condition such as dyslexia or dyspraxia, and they will be at a disadvantage with difficulty remembering information.

Additionally, Hutchings (2015:5) also found that children and young people are suffering from increasingly high levels of 'school-related anxiety and stress, disaffection and mental health problems.' She claims that this is caused, in part, by learners' greater awareness, increasingly at younger ages, of their own failure. This is relevant especially if high-functioning autistic learners are encouraged to measure their self-worth against standardised levels based on the expected performance of non-high-functioning autistic learners of the same chronological age. For the high-functioning autistic learner this anxiety and feeling of being at fault for failing may be exacerbated because of her/his experiences of living in a non-autistic world and learning in a classroom set up for a non-autistic way of thinking. This may also increase anxiety-ridden reactions that can be misunderstood.

Barron and Grandin (2016:16) allude to high-functioning autistic learners being 'locked in their own world' but I would argue that high-functioning autistic learners are not removed

from this world, rather they often see it from a different perspective, a perspective that is not necessarily the accepted view or norm of the society or community in which they live, study or work. Seeing a high-functioning autistic learner as being 'locked in their own world' may be in part at least a function of the society in which the individual lives remaining resistant to accepting different ways of seeing the world and communicating ideas, needs and desires, thereby overlooking that individual's unique and valuable contribution to society. Nussbaum (2010:10) would concur with this argument, suggesting that educators should not be forced to choose between a form of education that promotes profit and a form of education that promotes citizenship. A learning environment that strives to listen to and understand the high-functioning autistic mind, that is conducive to divergent thinking and intuition in terms of both physical surroundings and interpersonal relationships may constitute a learning environment for all learners in which teachers and learners learn from each other. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

Hutchings (2015) also states that the amount of time spent on creative teaching, investigation, play and practical work has reduced considerably and lessons have a more standardised format, resulting from pressure to prepare learners for tests and ignoring the uniqueness of the individual. However, Hutchings (2015) suggests that both primary and secondary learners learn more effectively in interactive and creative lessons because they are more memorable. This is certainly the case within the context of my own work situation, in which weekly enrichment classes for high-functioning autistic learners form part of a programme aptly named the 'Contribution Series' because each learner is asked to contribute socially, emotionally and intellectually to interactive activities. The programme is designed, led and facilitated by a specialist teacher and activities are based upon creativity, multi-sensory stimulation, communication, mutual respect for each other, and the building of social

relationships and includes art-based therapies, board games, quizzes, debates and physical activities. These sessions are enhanced by half-termly day trips, culminating in a week-long residential trip known as 'independence week'. The residential week, too, is appropriately named, because over the course of the academic year, the learners have built up positive peer and teacher social and emotional relationships, improved communication, and developed self-esteem as well as empathy and compassion for each other. The independence week, which presents both physical and intellectual challenges, is a significant marker of the recognition of the level of social and emotional development and independence a learner has achieved. Over time, I have observed learners, many of whom have crushingly low self-esteem and, in the past, have experienced bullying or have been told that they are odd or treated as though they are unintelligent, becoming much more animated, enthusiastic and talkative. They have developed confidence and the capacity to maintain eye contact, become less anxious, and are prepared to try new experiences. At the same time, their academic grades have increased suggesting this is not an either/or strategy.

Key to the success of this programme, I believe, is the attitude of the specialist teacher who unceasingly encourages the learners through praise and recognition, listening to them and encouraging mutual respect whilst valuing and celebrating each and every one as a unique, gifted individual rather than subjecting them to authoritarian and punitive treatment. The teacher's behaviour and attitude towards these learners has helped them to be extremely loyal, caring and emotionally literate. This, I understand, is not only because the learners have been made to feel valued as unique individuals but, through the programme, they have been given the opportunities or capabilities to use their senses, imagination and thought to reason and do things in what Nussbaum (2006a:76) terms 'a truly human way'. Moreover, as Dix (2017:156) argues, if a teacher's default response to behaviour is empathetic, kind and

patient, and if the teacher truly knows their learner as a person not a label, then success in teaching is inevitable. Dix (2017:2) goes further, arguing that classroom culture, which he claims is key to a successful learning environment, is set by the attitudes of the adults in the classroom, and the way they behave towards the learner and each other. Through a combination of the nature of the activities offered and the emotional dedication, patience, empathy and compassion that the specialist teacher provides, learners are able to use imagination and thought in relation to their peers and the teacher. Crucially, this specialist teacher of the Contribution Series, which won the Association of Colleges' National Annual Award for Enrichment and Employability, has shown other teachers how to love and care for their learners, and has shown the learners how to love and care for the adults charged with their safety and education. They learn to experience gratitude, shared grief and justified anger, and not to have their emotional development curtailed by fear and anxiety. This view will be developed further in Chapter Five. Fear and anxiety, I argue, is compounded by the effects of meritocracy, which can be detrimental to an individual's self-esteem and to develop this, I now return to Bentham.

Meritocracy

Key values of both Bentham's preferred form of education and that of the contemporary neoliberal view of education are meritocracy, and striving to reach perfection. Learners are frequently grouped according to so-called ability. In 2016, the then Prime Minister, Teresa May, in her speech set out her vision for a 'truly meritocratic Britain' based on the meritocratic principles of talent and hard work, where 'advantage is based on merit not privilege'. According to Morgan *et al*. (2012:1), a meritocratic institutional structure provides opportunities for 'high ability types' to socially and financially improve their own situation and attracts the best person for the best job. Indeed, I have benefitted personally from such a

structure. Coming from a working-class immigrant family living in South London, I was the first person in my family to attend university and work in a profession. I have a good salary and live in an affluent part of Surrey. However, meritocracy does not benefit all members of society and may not be the panacea it appears to be. Sandel (2020) describes meritocratic hubris, that is:

> … the smug convictions of those who land on top that they deserve their fate, [because of their own merit] and that those on the bottom deserve theirs, too. (Sandel, 2020:25).

He claims that meritocracy ignores the fact that not all people have the same opportunities or advantages as others, including, for example, those living in poverty or who are disabled. Many of the high-functioning autistic learners at the inner London sixth form college where I work also come from positions of inequality such as, for example, belonging to ethnic minority groups, and this may add to feelings of inadequacy and social anxiety and relate back to areas of societal deprivation/poverty. Sandel (2020) further argues that a perfect meritocracy banishes all sense of gift, grace or luck as it diminishes our capacity to see that we share a common fate, claiming that it leaves little room for the solidarity that we may feel from the contingency of our fortunes.

Furthermore, the absence of solidarity and seeing a common fate, Sandel (2020) argues, makes merit a kind of tyranny. The idea that a person is responsible for her/his own fate has both positive and negative consequences, inspiring in one way yet invidious in another. It congratulates the winners but simultaneously denigrates the losers, potentially damaging self-esteem. It is demoralising for those who lose out to be made to feel that failure is their own fault, they may think that they lack the talent and drive to succeed when they may not have had the same opportunities or, because of circumstance, may have been prevented from

achieving more. This in turn, Sandel (2020:25) argues, gives rise to ‘a politics of humiliation’, it can combine resentment of the winners with self-doubt and it can damage self-esteem. Meritocracy can also fuel the anger behind populist protest and undermine the social bonds that constitute our common life. I contend that it is also a threat to the social bonds between learners, their peers and their teachers in the classroom. For example, Goodley (2014) argues that a society based on free-market competition in its major public services and focused on individual capacity and meritocracy normalises ableism, that is, discrimination in favour of perceived able-bodied or able-minded individuals through the notion of an ‘ideal citizen’ who is the strongest survivor physically and mentally. This is because this model, as Altemeyer (1988) suggests, privileges an authoritarianism that moulds a person according to predetermined norms. These pre-determined norms are embodied in Bentham’s (1817) notion of the pedagogical principle of place-capturing, in which emulation and competition produce instantaneous reward and punishment. Learners are placed in line with the highest achieving learner first and the lowest achieving learner last. If the highest achieving learner makes a mistake, s/he loses her/his place of honour and moves down the line as a punishment. This concept, which may be considered humiliating to the individual instructed to move down the line, was considered to be an incentive to learning and formed the basis of meritocracy - advancing oneself through one’s own merits and efforts. For a high-functioning autistic learner, who has difficulty with self-expression, this may be particularly demoralising.

In short, the competitive nature of meritocracy may encourage a narrow and individualistic outlook on life that erodes empathy and compassion for others. Pickett and Wilkinson (2010) argue that:

> … the efficiency of the market economy seems to prove that greed and avarice are, as economic theory assumes, the overriding human motivations. (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010:199)

Additionally, Nussbaum (2006b:21) suggests that people 'attend to the needs of others in a way that is narrow or arbitrarily uneven'. This may be especially the case if a standardised, meritocratic and utilitarian view of educational support for high-functioning autistic learners is adopted with an individual viewed as either 'normal' or 'abnormal' according to social norms and offered support according to a classified set of symptoms found in medical manuals. Social norms, including accepted models of behaviour, are by definition rules that are created by societies, not by individuals. Democratic and liberal societies hold that the majority decide what is best for the community and for those individuals who may not fit a characteristic profile set by social norms. Furthermore, utilitarianism brings a pragmatic perspective to behaviour considered right or wrong: it is considered right if it brings collective happiness as a consequence. However, as high-functioning autistic learners do not by their nature fit with the majority, any decisions regarding their support made by the those in authority may discriminate against high-functioning autistic learners and compound pressures inside the classroom. This is why the voice of the autistic learner is central to educational research if there is to be true inclusion. Moreover, the political, social, moral and cultural values of a member of a society also lie in the basic principles of a social contract and it is to a discussion of that which I now turn.

According to Christman (2002), a social contract is an implicit agreement among members of a society to cooperate with each other for social benefits and it is also an intellectual tool aimed at explaining necessary relationships between an individual and her/his government. In the social contract, people give up their rights with the expectation that others would do the same for them. Nussbaum (2006a:10) gives the example of sacrificing an individual freedom

for state protection, for peace, security, and mutual advantage. An instance of this was when, in the COVID-19 crisis, the government announced that everyone should remain socially isolated in their own dwellings in quarantine to prevent the spread of disease. Through a form of action between individuals that assumes that neither party gains an advantage, a set of rules that then form laws and regulations that inform policy and practice to protect the interests of each person is devised.

According to Nussbaum (2006a), the social contract seemingly has potentially two benefits. Firstly, human interests are served well by political society, as seen for example, in the running of a health care system such as the National Health Service (NHS) to ensure that every citizen, no matter what her/his financial background, has access to adequate health care. Secondly, if an individual's privileges such as wealth, rank or social class are removed, in other words, if a person is taken back to their original state as a human being, s/he is likely to agree to a type of contract that appears to have fair principles. John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), argues that a social contract is hypothetical. He does not claim that people agree to a particular set of morally defensible principles of justice but, rather, that they would agree hypothetically to such principles under certain specific conditions.

> … now why should not a society act on precisely the same principle applied to the group and therefore regard that which is rational for one man as to the right for an association of men? Just as the well-being of a person is constructed from the series of satisfactions that are experienced at different moments in the course of his life, so in very much the same way the well-being of society is to be constructed from the fulfilment of the systems of desires of the many individuals who belong to it. (Rawls, 1971:21)

Rawls thus recognises the importance of individual happiness as well as collective happiness. However, his argument is one that lends itself to the individual being treated equally, that is all the same rather than equitably. He suggests that humans are dignified and unique from

other animals because they have the capacity to reason from a universal point of view, which means that they have a particular moral capacity to judge principles from an impartial standpoint. He calls this the Original Position, claiming that from that position, where we know nothing about ourselves, we can discover the nature of justice and what is required of people as individuals to live co-operatively in a society. He suggests imagining a position of pre-birth in which people will not know their race, gender, wealth, culture, capacity, religion, or personality. They only have access to general ideas about justice and science from which to choose principles of justice which are fair. Because no one has any of the knowledge s/he could use to develop principles that favour her/his own situation in the Original Position, principles chosen are assumed to be created from a fair perspective. Rawls (1971) calls choosing principles in this way, the Veil of Ignorance. Behind the Veil of Ignorance, Rawls argues, there would be no minority groups marginalised by the majority as with laws and principles chosen by a utilitarian majority, people would choose to implement principles around providing basic human rights for all, with equal access to education, employment opportunities and politics. He claims that each of us wants to be respected as an individual with dignity, liberty and equitable rights and his logic is that if there is no distinction between people then there would be fewer trade-offs regarding social and economic inequalities.

In theory, setting learners in standardised ability groups such as those advocated in Bentham's model, should allow learners to pursue learning at their own pace and advance through their own merit, maintaining equality of opportunity regardless of social background. However, equality of opportunity may not be successful for two reasons. Firstly, using exams as the main determining factor of an individual's placement within a merit-based system means that the definition of merit is never one's own academic capacity, but one's capacity to process, memorise and communicate information, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Rawls'

premise for a just society is the distribution of primary social goods that should not depend upon natural or social contingencies or on any notion of intrinsic moral worth. Therefore, exam-based meritocracy is problematic because it is strongly determined by one's natural capacities for example the ability to process and memorise information. But secondly, and as noted above, academic capacity and certainly the capacity to gain high assessment grades, are influenced by a person's socio-economic background and biological disposition. An individual from an affluent and educated family will likely have more learning opportunities as s/he is growing up, for example private tutoring in training for secondary school entrance exams, than would an individual whose parents have less residual income to spend on private tutors and fewer educational opportunities themselves and so is at a disadvantage. Similarly, an individual whose genetic make-up includes certain physical or mental conditions or difficulties may be at a disadvantage cognitively or socially.

Nonetheless, Rawls recognises that inequalities will always exist in some form. Some people will be better at making money than others, some will be more talented in a certain area, and some will just be luckier than others. To acknowledge this, he suggests agreeing to a qualified principle of inequality known as the Difference Principle, according to which a person may become extremely wealthy from her/his talent or fortunate position as long as there are social mechanisms in place to ensure that those in most need also benefit. Rawls (1971) states:

> Those who have been favoured by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those that lost out. (Rawls, 1971:72)

This might, for example, take the form of higher taxation from the wealthy for the provision of funding for the support of learners with SEND needs. Using this approach, Rawls highlights some criticisms of the utilitarian system of meritocracy, in which the individual

acquires merit, achievement and status through her/his own hard labour and effort. However, meritocracy may make some parts of the community happy, whilst others suffer. Those who are born into supportive families and receive a good education have advantages over those who do not. Allowing everyone to enter the race may be a good thing, but if the runners start from different starting points, the race will be unfair.

However, Rawls does argue, along with Kant (1785) and Nussbaum, that no person should be merely the ends of another for the benefit of society, but should be regarded as an end in her/himself. The individual should be valued for who s/he is as a dignified human being not for how much use or utility s/he provides for the benefit of a society. Providing opportunities and resources so that everyone has the same starting point, however, is not sufficient because it does not go far enough: not all people have the same starting position or access to resources and opportunities to develop. Rawls (1971) argues that natural selection is arbitrary, in a race the fastest runners would win and so it appears that, in this respect, achievement through merit is not fair as it does not obviate the natural lottery of the position into which a person is born. Moreover, even if everyone started from the same position, only the fittest and the strongest would obtain the opportunities and flourishing available and the majority would be left behind.

Meritocracy within the context of the social contract may remove some social differences and inequalities but, as Rawls (1971) argues, it still permits the distribution of wealth and income to be determined by the natural distribution of abilities and talents. Rawls also assumes that people are rational and take little interest in each other's well-being when determining what is good for themselves. He suggests that the formulators and agents of the social contract are not motivated by benevolence, rather that each is motivated to obtain as many primary goods

as s/he can and does not much care whether others obtain these or not. By making this assumption about human nature, Rawls' social contract acknowledges the separateness of the individual. This will likely present a problem for those starting from a disadvantaged position as Rawls' view largely ignores the interdependency of people. People are bound by their own circumstances, including their health, and by differences in their rationalising and thinking processes, their wealth, their religious beliefs and culture, and their own perceived interests which are born out of the societies in which they live and the people with whom they interact. It is this interdependency, where one's flourishing is bound up with another's, as discussed in Chapter Two and later in Chapter Five, that Nussbaum (2006a:14) identifies as important in the three unsolved problems of social justice in today's society that are the legacy of social contract theories to which I now turn.

In *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality and Species Membership* Nussbaum (2006a:14) claims that the first problem of social justice in today's society concerns equal citizenship and disability, the second problem is extending justice to all world citizens, creating a world in which accidents of birth and national origin do not hinder people's life chances, and the third problem of justice is the treatment of non-human animals. The unsolved problem of most relevance to this study is the first problem of disability. Nussbaum (2006a:104) puts forward the argument that people considered to have disabilities or learning differences have not yet been included in existing societies as citizens on the basis of equality with other citizens because the social contract tradition is a contract for mutual advantage among people who are 'free, equal and independent'. She suggests this problem exists because solving it requires a new way of thinking about the definition and understandings of a citizen, of personhood and of what it means to be human which would embrace diverse

ways of thinking and being. This would also require a different analysis of the purpose of social co-operation, rather than regard it for mutual advantage as in Rawls' contractarianism.

Nussbaum (2006a) claims that the social contract focuses on the question: for whom and by whom are society's basic principles designed? In the social contract, the main subjects of social justice are also those who choose society's principles. However, and as noted above, Rawls' version specifies certain prerequisites such as rationality, a common language, and a rough equality of physical and mental capacity for participation in the discussion of the agreement of principles, legislation and policy. Nussbaum (2006a:104) criticises Rawls' argument because he stipulates that agents in the Original Position know that their natural cognitive abilities, intelligence and talents all 'lie within the normal range'. Nussbaum (2006a) states that conceiving people this way does not recognize that there may be alternative ways of thinking and being. This would imply that high-functioning autistic people would either be expected to behave or react in the same way as other non-autistic people or be deemed to be somehow incompetent and so omitted from or have limited power in social and political life and decision-making.

Furthermore, the Benthamite utilitarian and standardised narrow view of what it means to be human effectively dismisses the possibility that people may have a different definition of what happiness means to them at different times in their lives. It also dismisses any acknowledgement that there are different ways of processing and communicating, or that some experience difficulties with cognition and emotion yet are still intellectually adept and capable of expressing needs and desires in verbal or written forms. This could result in high-functioning autistic people being excluded from the decisions of the principles of society that affect their own quality of life and life opportunities directly, resulting in legislation not

reflecting the views or values of the person with SEND. Furthermore, in this way, the social contract theory encourages a deficit view of autism, that of the medical model as discussed in Chapter Two implying that a high-functioning autistic person should be cured or her/his deficits alleviated with support strategies so that s/he aspires to become, or at least to mimic, the behaviours of a non-autistic or non-divergent thinking person.

Nussbaum (2006a) argues that ingrained in the spirit of Rawls' social contract is the notion that people come together with others and agree upon basic political principles and that all involved stand to gain mutually from that cooperation. People leave a state of nature, that is neutrality in the context of rights, to gain mutual benefit. This, Nussbaum (2006a:104) maintains, may exclude people who are either 'unusually expensive' or are expected to 'contribute far less than most to the well-being of the group', hence categorising people as valuable and non-valuable. This negates the argument that high-functioning autistic people are different from not less than others. This would create inequality for high-functioning autistic learners who may require extra academic and social and emotional support, but who have ~~a~~ much to offer society because of their different way of thinking, their capacity to think creatively, to systematize, that is to organize subjects into systems and to be logical.

I have observed on a number of occasions in a classroom situation where the high-functioning autistic learner is treated as having a cognitive deficit, that the teacher has missed the opportunity to learn something valuable from the contribution the learner could have made if given the opportunity. It is assumed by the teacher that the learner is not be capable of answering, so s/he is not asked. As a result, the learner is excluded from the discussion and the group may well miss out on a valuable contribution that may have given them a different perspective on a topic. According to Silberman (2015), many famous scientists and

inventors such as Einstein and Tesla, who were both thought to have been high-functioning autistic, were often overlooked and even socially scorned. The social contract idea of mutual advantage and the assumption that everyone thinks and functions in a similar way distorts our understanding of the benefits of social cooperation. Additionally, one could argue that using a Veil of Ignorance where no one is aware of the other's life context or experiences may lead to a lack of knowledge of the historical context of a society where prejudice and inequality may have prevailed, as well as of the individual experiences of those who have been marginalised within that particular society. By not allowing someone to be aware of what it is like to be marginalised, it is harder for that person to be empathetic and choose a law or principles that benefit all. Thus, the principle would not be equitable as the needs of some groups and individuals could be ignored. This unease is reflected in the findings of Dockrell *et al*. (2020) who argue that current research evidence demonstrates a much more complex and interrelated picture of an individual with types of SEND, age, ethnicity and socio-economic disadvantage all playing a part to varying degrees. Acknowledging and addressing this complexity as far as support and inclusion of the high-functioning autistic learner is concerned in the light of the Capabilities Approach will be a focus of Chapters Five and Six.

In summary to this chapter, my first concern that the capitalisation of a human being, determining educational funding by the value for money per learner, makes a person a key investment for the state while promoting an individualistic, insular and competitive outlook on life. This explains my first concern, that the neoliberal agenda of a standardised and commodified education system creates a pressured classroom environment. Moreover, according to Goodley (2014:29), meritocracy and standardisation that I argue is born out of Benthamite thinking have normalised a desire for sameness. Success is achieved through having a body and mind, considered by the majority to be 'able'. This constitutes the

neoliberal and utilitarian baseline by which the definition of a singular and standardised human being is determined and it sets the measure of body and mind that gives or denies social status to the individual. This eliminates the dignity of the human being as a unique person with much to give and can destroy self-worth. Furthermore, progress is determined in terms of one's life as a producer-consumer with needs and human capital, situated in a market environment in which everything and everyone has economic value or is potentially expendable. Many people fail to match up to these entrepreneurial and competitive criteria in this meritocratic system. Strength and ability are commodities that are desirable and this encourages the pursuit of hyper-cognitive forms of life, always striving to become more successful, more perfect than the next person and deemed to be 'better value for money' in terms of the individual's worth to society. This view renders cognitively diverse people vulnerable to being ignored by society and not valued for their uniqueness. It fails to understand diversity, including the different way that people think and feel as emotional beings who are often misunderstood. To explain the source of some of these misunderstandings and miscommunications in the college environment, I will now give an account of the difficulties that high-functioning autistic learners and their teachers encounter in the classroom.

Chapter Four: Difficulties high-functioning autistic learners and their teachers face in the classroom.

> What we have here is a failure to communicate.
>
> Cool Hand Luke, Film, 1967.

The above epigraph highlights a concept which is intrinsic to the theme of this chapter, that is that a dialogue between every individual in the classroom is necessary for education to take place. Moreover, I argue that such a conversation is unlikely to occur if the individual designated as the teacher is only employing one form of discourse. As high-functioning autistic learners, and indeed many other learners, have different ways of thinking, the teacher needs to be able to communicate in a variety of ways. However, teacher training in England seems to generally encourage the development of one kind of rational, logical, standardised thinking to facilitate the establishment of a kind of meritocracy as discussed in the last chapter. This, in its design, seems to exclude, at least to often ignore, emotional or imaginative discourse and thinking based on the individual learner's own rational and logical connections. Griffiths and Stefanini (2020) argue that there is a genuine area of need regarding the education of teachers working with learners who have diverse ways of thinking. If this does not occur then any learner for whom emotional or imaginative or other particular kinds of discourse is essential may be systematically excluded. Hence it is important to address my second concern, that high functioning autism is often misunderstood. In pursuit of improving understanding, I will discuss some of the difficulties high-functioning autistic learners and their teachers face in the classroom. These difficulties may either be founded on or lead to erroneous assumptions about high-functioning autistic learners by non-autistic

people and erroneous assumptions being made by high-functioning autistic learners about non-autistic people.

This chapter is in three parts. The first part is an account of the nature of autism, initially as described through the experiences reported to me of the high-functioning autistic learner community at the college in which I teach because I believe that accounts of individual experience best describe the daily challenges that high-functioning autistic learners face in the classroom and highlight the complexities of learners' experiences, barriers and inter-relatedness with aspects of their lives such as culture and the social norms of the society within which the individual lives. As there are multiple theories of the nature of autism, I will refer to Baron-Cohen's book *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (1995), his article *Autism and The Technical Mind* (2012) and Baron-Cohen and Golan's article *Systematizing Empathy: Teaching Adults With Asperger Syndrome or High-Functioning Autism to Recognize Complex Emotions Using Interactive Multimedia* (2006) to discuss modern psychologists' theories about aspects of high-functioning autistic thinking and rationalisation that may result in learners experiencing barriers to communication and learning in the classroom. This includes empathizing-systematizing theory, obsessional and polarized thinking, social motivation and social isolation. I will also refer to Runswick-Cole, Mallett and Timmi's *Re-thinking Autism: Diagnosis, Identity and Equality* (2016) and Bogdashina's *Theory of Mind and the Triad of Perspectives on Autism and Asperger's Syndrome* (2006) as these texts are well-documented and widely recognized as authoritative in current autism and disability research. It is important to note here that the barriers identified and the theories discussed are not exhaustive and may not be universally experienced, but they are most pertinent to my own working context and thus to this Dissertation.

The second part of this chapter will focus on the professional and personal challenges that teachers may face in the classroom that may impede the development of effective working relationships between them and their high-functioning autistic learners. This will include a critical discussion of the internal and external drivers and pressures that influence and affect teachers in the classroom, such as performance and accountability measures as discussed in the last chapter, a lack of understanding of the nature of autism, personal values and beliefs, and impostor syndrome or low confidence as an educational practitioner and I refer to the work of Stephen Brookfield and Paul Dix who have a wealth of experience in the classroom as practitioners. As with the learners, the experiences or difficulties I will describe are based upon the ones most commonly reported to me by my teaching colleagues both within my own institution and in other institutions that I have networked with. The final part of this chapter will focus on the common emotions generated by both high-functioning autistic learners and non-autistic teachers as a result of the challenges they experience together, with emotion broadly interpreted and including anxiety, fear and anger resulting from feeling pressurised, threatened and vulnerable. These emotions, I will argue in this chapter and the next, are not signs of weakness, but are part of the human condition and are, in part, symptomatic of the negative effects of living in the current neoliberal and utilitarian educational and social environment. As I cannot directly quote the learners that I teach, I will reflect their views by using Barron and Grandin's work *The Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships: Decoding Social Mysteries Through Autism's Unique Perspectives* (2016) as many of the experiences and anecdotes in this book mirror the experiences reported by the high-functioning autistic learners at the college where I teach and learners have asked me to include them in this Dissertation when I have read excerpts of the book out to them.

Difficulties high-functioning autistic learners experience in the classroom.

As noted, I teach and support sixth form college high-functioning autistic learners, many of whom are extremely creative and innovative divergent thinkers. In line with the definition given by the American Psychiatric Association (2013), Runswick-Cole, Timimi et al. (2016) observe that such learners may have average to outstanding intelligence, strong verbal or written skills and vocabulary, a tendency to grasp meaning through intellect rather than intuition, a deep curiosity and willingness to think critically. They may also notice detail, and have a keen memory and imagination and powers of observation. Further and Higher Education values intellectual inquiry, analytical capacity, imagination and creativity, especially in the Arts and Humanities, an area in which many high-functioning autistic learners at the college thrive because this subject area, as well as subjects such as Advanced Mathematics or Scientific Research, play to their strengths. Even so, high-functioning autistic learners at the college where I teach have described classroom and college experiences as universally confusing. They have said that they regularly misinterpret social signals, facial expression, non-verbal and verbal language and inference and that they have difficulties understanding the emotions of others. They report that others also misinterpret them, resulting in miscommunication and conflict. This, in turn, can make them feel that almost every decision they make or reaction they express must be carefully thought through lest it be misunderstood or seen as inappropriate or odd that results in their constantly questioning their own judgements, contributing to social anxiety and isolation.

Additionally, I have observed high-functioning autistic learners becoming fixated on one belief, thought or interest, to the extent that this can lead to depression. High-functioning autistic learners have described waking up in the morning still feeling worried and anxious or

sometimes obsessing over an event that happened three days previously. They have also reported experiencing the world as full of confusing abstract inferences, unclear social boundaries, and grey areas in which logical systems and rules always have exceptions and so cannot be relied upon. Hence, they feel there is no stability. Some learners are unable to differentiate between a person's intention and the outcome of a situation, to the extent that they are constantly worried that they are being manipulated or bullied by others or they cannot trust anyone. Other high-functioning autistic learners have expressed frustration at being told to grow up or behave themselves because they find it hard to communicate effectively how they feel to others, or they feel others are not listening to them. Moreover, they have reported that they feel that they are either ignored or are spoken to in a patronising way because they have been labelled as having a "special need". These experiences highlight the importance of not merely thinking but feeling, in the teaching and learning processes. This is particularly pertinent to learners on the autistic spectrum because, as Baron-Cohen and Golan (2006) suggest, many are highly intuitive and sensitive to emotional feeling.

Furthermore, high-functioning autistic learners have reported that the physical environment can also have an effect not only on how they feel emotionally, but also on whether they can function at all, and this relates especially to those who are extra-sensitive to sensory stimuli. For example, the light in a classroom may make a person feel faint, or the sound of the wind outside may vibrate through her/his whole body so that s/he cannot focus on work, or the smell of someone's perfume can make her/him feel nauseous. For such reasons, learners often become overwhelmed and experience a meltdown: anxiety takes over and they either leave the room or display what is often interpreted as disruptive behaviour.

It is evident that the difficulties and challenges that each autistic learner faces in the classroom is very individual and wide-ranging. Accordingly, for the purpose of this Dissertation, I will focus on the social and emotional challenges that a high-functioning autistic person may face, difficulties that are connected to verbal communication, social functioning, emotion and empathy, and how these may play out in the classroom. It is these challenges that I shall argue in this chapter contribute to and compound problems with working relationships between teachers and learners and which may affect academic learning and achievement. I will argue here, and in ensuing chapters, that this is because social and emotional knowledge and skills are fundamental elements of human interaction, and it is through human interaction that a person learns. For clarity, I will now describe the nature of autism from psychological, neurological and professional perspectives and note how these characteristics may manifest as difficulties in the classroom. Based on observations from my working experience, I will also critically discuss how teachers can be influenced by the medical view of autism discussed in Chapter Two and suggest that the adoption of this view can contribute to prejudice, unconscious bias and labelling.

As noted, autistic learners who are considered to be high-functioning, that is who appear to be verbally articulate and academically able, may face invisible but very real challenges. Because these social and emotional challenges are invisible, Grandin and Panek (2014) claim that teachers are less apt to provide the kind of assistance such learners may require, and their peers may view them as weird or odd. They may also not realise that high-functioning autistic learners may be unaware and uninformed about social norms and nuances that non-autistic people process subconsciously and take for granted. High-functioning autistic learners may experience problems on a social and emotional level for many different reasons. However, particularly pertinent to this Dissertation are those challenges arising from the

complexities of understanding and processing emotions. According to Barron and Grandin (2016), inference and intuition are required to navigate the emotional world in order to understand the invisible relationships between verbal and non-verbal contexts that characterise human communication in the social world. This is because non-verbal signals convey so much meaning and intention. For someone who has difficulty processing and understanding such complexities, this can cause confusion and anxiety. Baron-Cohen and Golan's (2006) theory of the way the high-functioning autistic brain works, that is empathizing-systematizing theory as well as polarized and obsessive thinking and projection, may provide an explanation for the frequency of such miscommunications and social awkwardness, and I will now focus on this.

Empathizing-Systematizing Theory

Empathizing-Systematizing Theory, as expounded by Baron-Cohen and Golan (2006), explain the social and communication difficulties that learners on the high-functioning autistic spectrum may face by reference to delays and deficits in empathy when simultaneously creating systems of information. According to Baron-Cohen and Golan (2006), there are generally two main types of thinkers: empathizers and systematizers, and they experience and view the world differently. Baron-Cohen and Golan (2006) argue that autistic people tend to be systematizers rather than empathizers, although the degree to which a person is a systematizer rather than an empathizer will vary from individual to individual. Baron-Cohen and Golan (2006) argue that an empathizer's brain is orientated towards understanding the minds of others and being able to intuit and relate to other people's feelings. By contrast, a person who systematizes tries to understand the world through observed laws and rules and, in search of the truth, attempts to fit everything s/he encounters in life, including social relationships and abstract notions, into a final mathematical formula.

Systematizing works by noting structure and rules so that one can predict a future event. Following this logic, everything has a practical purpose and follows rules. In this way, the process and outcome of future events can be predictable and concrete, thereby reducing anxiety. This also means that high-functioning autistic learners may have excellent attention to detail and a great understanding of a system in academic work, such as computer system analysis.

Nevertheless, systematization is a difficult concept to apply to unpredictable social situations and functioning because it does not consider exceptions to rules, contextualisation, or the complexities of emotion and of life in general. Anything that occurs that does not fit into the structure, for example, an unexpected event, may trigger anxiety as it is outside the system and is thus unpredictable. This unpredictability can make the person feel vulnerable, which in turn may induce anxiety or fear as it is the 'unknown' and may represent a danger, inducing a fight or flight response. The difficulty is that the nature of human life and the world is unpredictable and changing and so, if an unpredictable event occurs in the classroom, the high-functioning systematizing autistic learner may have a problem identifying or selecting the most appropriate reaction in that situation. This may cause the learner to become anxious and this anxiety may manifest itself in, for example, a refusal to remain in her/his seat, appearing to be argumentative or talking in an aggressive tone, walking out of or even throwing furniture around the room. Learners I have taught have described feelings of sheer terror, of drowning, and the fear of being ridiculed, and so, out of panic and desperation, they get up from their seat. Simultaneously, teachers have reported feeling intimidated by tall, adolescent learners suddenly standing up and towering intimidatingly over them with a menacing face. However, often the learner's facial expression is one of panic rather than threat and 'towering over the teacher' is a result of the learner's loss of spatial awareness due

to the feeling of urgently needing help but not knowing how to ask for it. This highlights the necessity for teachers to establish empathetic and compassionate relationships with their learners and learning to understand their behaviour. In classes that I have observed, when the learner feels valued, listened to and understood, there is little need for classroom management as the learner is prepared and able to listen to the teacher, and feels valued rather than anxious.

The social world is a complex amalgamation of spoken and unspoken cultural and social norms, of interaction between people, each perceiving things from their own perspective, and of discussions that include abstract notions and conceptions. In successful daily relationships, two or more agents share appropriate emotional reactions to each other's thoughts and feelings including those communicated in body language through empathy, the capacity to understand and at least in part comprehend another's feelings and share a common emotion, creating a sympathetic bond between the agents. According to Baron-Cohen (2012), non-autistic people unconsciously mind-read or interpret people's body language to keep track of what they deem to be their own reality whilst simultaneously understanding or attempting to understand someone else's different beliefs in order to empathize. Empathy is arguably impossible without the capacity to question one's own reality or be open to other possible realities. This capacity to question one's own reality and be open to other possibilities, Baron-Cohen and Golan (2006) argue, is almost impossible for many high-functioning autistic people because systematization of thought does not allow for flexible consideration of other possible realities, thoughts or beliefs. Teachers then need to find a way to channel or tap into systematization whilst developing and maintaining relationships of trust. This may help develop ways for high-functioning autistic learners to interpret social situations that may

require empathy or tact and it is this that I address in the next chapter, but for now I return to empathizing-systematizing theory.

Empathizing-systematizing theory requires careful consideration to be properly understood. It is important to note that Baron-Cohen and Golan (2006) do not argue that autistic people lack empathy. They recognize that they may or may not have difficulty with cognitive empathy, that is imagining another's state of mind, but they argue that they tend not to have affective empathy, that is the capacity to feel an appropriate emotion triggered by another's state of mind. I would concur with this argument as I have observed in my work that although high-functioning autistic learners tend not to empathize with others in a conventional way, they do empathise and show compassion for others in different and diverse ways. For example, one high-functioning autistic learner knows that a social rule he can follow when dealing with stressful situations is to leave the classroom and go to the chaplaincy base, a designated quiet room in which he can make a cup of coffee. Recently, my father was in hospital with a serious health condition. When I came into the college, I met this learner with his assistant. The assistant asked after the well-being of my father. After explaining the situation, and saying that I was tired and worried, the learner responded by suggesting I go to the quiet room where I should make a cup of coffee. I believe that this was the learner's way of both empathizing and sympathizing with me. He recognized, through my body language and speech, that I was anxious, an emotion to which he could relate and with which he was sympathetic. He knew his strategy for helping anxiety subside and so he advised me to do the same. I suggest that this allowed him to express empathy in a way that could be understood by the non-autistic world. However, as each learner is different, careful consideration of strategies needs to take place, so I argue that it is vital for teachers to get to know their learners and interactions such as that described above are delicate and can easily go awry.

This is because any negative interaction or misinterpretation may cause anxiety and trigger or compound obsessional or polarized thinking as a way to gain control over a situation and it is to this I now turn.

Obsessional, Polarized Thinking and Projection

Grupe and Nitschke (2013) suggest that acute anxiety about lack of control of a situation may manifest itself in symptoms associated with compulsion and obsession. For instance, a learner with a special interest in trains may have the compulsion to read train timetables in a study break to be able to ease her/his anxiety about studying or being in the classroom. Giving the learner a few minutes to review train timetables may ease behaviour deemed as destructive in the classroom as the learner's anxiety is lifted by the release of being able to focus on something which s/he is passionate about and with which s/he feel secure. Similarly, high-functioning autistic learners may also use their special interest as a topic in conversation as a safe way to conduct discussion in social situations that they find anxiety inducing. However, these coping strategies may also cause problems socially if, for example, the high-functioning autistic learner talks constantly about her/his interest to the point where others are no longer prepared or content to listen. Having teachers who can be trusted by the autistic person, by whom s/he feels valued and who help her/him make sense of the world, may be vital for learning and reassuring the learner that s/he is interpreting the world accurately. This way, s/he may feel that s/he no longer needs to rely as much on obsessional interests to provide security in the classroom and this, in turn, could help the autistic learner feel more in control.

An additional issue is the tendency for autistic learners to split or polarise thinking, the failure in a person's thinking to reconcile the dichotomy of both positive and negative

qualities of the self and others into a cohesive, realistic whole. Joy (2020), suggests that dichotomous thinking may create instability in relationships because one person can be viewed as either a person of virtue or vice within a given situation. This will depend on whether s/he gratifies the subject's needs or frustrate them. For example, one learner always refers to me as her favourite teacher when she is having a good day, but if a negative event happens during the day and I tell her she cannot do something because it is not socially appropriate such as using a profanity, she says that she despises me and claims that I fabricate reasons for her not to cross boundaries. She says that I have an ulterior motive other than protecting her from being taken advantage of by unscrupulous members of the wider community. This is most often a projection of the individual's frustration about a situation onto the agent who is reinforcing the boundary and, over time, the learner generally realises that the agent is not manipulating her/him and does not have an alternative agenda for her/his own gain.

Projection may be defined as a defence mechanism by which the human ego defends itself against unconscious impulses or qualities by denying their existence in themselves while attributing them to another by, for example, shifting blame onto another. Freud (1890:210) claims that in psychological projection, thoughts, motivations, desires and feelings that cannot be accepted as one's own are dealt with by being located in the outside world and being attributed to someone else. On this account, the psyche projects the experiences of weakness or vulnerability onto the other person with the aim of ridding itself of those feelings through its disdain of them or the act of blaming the other. Often the one who is closest to the person emotionally is the recipient of the projection. At the base of it all is a sense of insecurity and vulnerability. However, this may compound difficulties with trust, if the learner has trusted others and been let down by them in the past or has been heavily criticised

by others. This, together with low self-esteem, difficulties with identity and rapid mood fluctuation, may lead to unstable relationships, intense emotional experiences and negative reactions in the classroom. Because of this difference in social awareness and understanding, polarized thinking and projection may cause arguments and confrontational situations between autistic and non-autistic learners and teachers in the classroom.

Furthermore, according to Beck *et al*. (1985), polarized thinking and projection are usually characterized by immediacy and impulsivity. In the classroom, this may lead to knee-jerk reactions. For example, if a learner has a small disagreement with a friend, s/he may break the friendship off completely, apportioning blame to the friend because the autistic learner is projecting her/his anxiety onto her/him. Similarly, if a learner receives a low grade in a test, s/he may wish to abandon the whole subject due to an ill-perceived sense of total failure. Moreover, polarized thinking may be linked to obsessional and systematized thinking by the learner creating a series of rigid rules that must be adhered to in order to provide a sense of stability to alleviate the anxiety caused by the unpredictability of the outside world. Barron (2016a:103) describes how, as a learner, he used his polarized thinking at school to create control and structure his day, as a coping mechanism to minimize the unpredictability of daily occurrences in life. He says:

> I devised a series of arbitrary, *unwritten* rules I expected them [people] to follow that was in line with my black-and-white thinking patterns. When they failed to perform according to these rules – rules they were largely unaware of – all hell broke loose in my world and theirs. (Barron, 2016a:103)

For Barron, the unpredictability of life made him feel as if he had lost control: stability would be gone and his anxiety would feel unbearable. This would often cause him to have angry outbursts directed at other people. Barron (2016a) explains that this apparently inappropriate behaviour was his way of making sense of an environment that, often, had chaos and anxiety

at its core instead of control and structure. High-functioning autistic learners may thus appear to be 'odd' in their interactions compared with non-autistic people because such behaviour may lie outside the logic that the non-autistic person has subconsciously learned when growing up through social and cultural norms. Consequently, a lack of understanding on the part of non-autistic people may lead to feelings of anxiety, mood swings and social isolation for the high-functioning autistic learner.

Additionally, many of the high-functioning autistic learners at the college where I teach come from deprived backgrounds. They may go to the free breakfast club or be on free school meals, and they often skip meals resulting in poor nutrition. Others live in overcrowded accommodation and have little or no place to study. Many live on estates where they are afraid to walk alone in their local area, which are overwrought with gang culture. All of this may put a strain on the nervous system, resulting in nervous exhaustion and the learner feeling overtired, anxious, disorganised and fragile. When that happens, her/his behaviour in the classroom may become either withdrawn or boisterous. The teacher only sees the external manifestation of these difficulties and considers this disruptive behaviour. The world simply moves too fast for the high-functioning autistic learner, with too much information coming too quickly for them to process. Barron (2016a:99) explains that not knowing how to express his complicated emotions was at the root of his anger, fear and isolation.

> Having autism meant living daily life under a dark cloud of unrelenting fear that I came into the world with – and for which there seemed to be no cause and no long-term relief. (Barron, 2016a:99)

Many learners I have taught say that they often try to hide their fear or anxiety by acting out a role. They try to behave in the way that they think society will want in order to fit in and try to restrain, to hold inside themselves, their anxiety and the ways in which they would like to behave. By the time the learners get home, they are so exhausted they are ready to collapse. Parents often report to me that learners have meltdowns in the evening at home after college

because of nervous energy depletion. This, in turn, may result in poor sleep patterns and so on the following day the learner's energy is depleted before s/he even enters the classroom, and so the vicious cycle continues. When energy is depleted, the inability to make accurate judgements and becoming emotionally over-sensitive or anxious may become an unsurmountable challenge for some high-functioning autistic learners. This makes interaction with others more difficult, especially if the learner is true to their feelings to the point of appearing to be blunt or rude, which occurs with many high-functioning autistic learners. This may be in part because it can be difficult for them to distinguish between honesty and diplomacy which requires an understanding of empathy and inference or being able to read non-verbal signals from others and it is to this that I now turn.

The difference between honesty and diplomacy

Knowing the difference between honesty and diplomacy is complex and can cause tension in the classroom if it is misunderstood. As a society, we value honesty and the truth, yet we may present facts to people in a way that may appear less than honest in order not to hurt their feelings. Diplomacy requires tact, which, according to Serrat (2017) calls for the ability to understand one's own and other's emotions and the capacity to tell the truth in a way that considers other people's feelings and reactions. It enables a person to give difficult feedback, communicate sensitive information and say the appropriate thing to preserve a relationship. To be tactful and diplomatic and at the same time honest, requires empathy and emotional awareness as well as subtlety: complex characteristics and emotions that may be difficult for high-functioning autistic people to comprehend. An autistic person is sometimes unable to see beyond her/his own feelings or may misinterpret another's emotions, for example, mistaking passionate talk for anger. Together with literal and polarized thinking and perception, this may mean s/he is unable to understand how an emotional response deemed

inappropriate could affect another person. Nason (2014) suggests that telling the cold truth is easier than being diplomatic which requires contextualisation, judging the perspective of the other person and looking for non-verbal clues about a person's motives.

Furthermore, honesty and diplomacy have no clear-cut boundaries: personal ethics and morals dictate our opinions and, even within social groups, what is right or wrong can vary greatly. This processing and judgement take time and social interaction requires speed, so the learner tells the truth or remains silent, and may respond to a person without regard to context or another's feelings, thinking that honesty is a positive quality to be welcomed. But such honesty often evokes an indignant negative response. Thus, due to the anxiety associated with misjudging a situation and being considered insulting, high-functioning autistic learners can be sent out of class or bullied, or lose friends and then avoid social situations. This highlights the responsibility of teachers to help learners establish and maintain appropriate human relationships in both the classroom and the community. However, teachers cannot be expected to do this if they do not understand the implications of social motivation which includes assisting the learner in understanding and navigating social inference and connecting experiences together and so it is to social functioning and emotional relatedness that I now turn.

Social functioning and emotional relatedness

According to Grandin and Panek (2014), social functioning skills constitute a way of behaving, while emotional relatedness is a way of feeling. Together, they determine how people interact emotionally with each other and provide a sense of connection to others, an internal motivation to form friendships and bond with others. Emotional relatedness typically involves expressions of affection, outward actions that mirror inner feelings and emotions,

and consideration of others' points of view – qualities that are often difficult for high-functioning autistic people to comprehend. Furthermore, social functioning skills and emotional relatedness may not develop simultaneously. Grandin and Panek (2014) liken social functioning skills to learning a role in a play, following instructions to comply with what is deemed to be appropriate behaviour and to meet the expectations of the society in which the individual lives, for example, taking turns or saying 'please' and 'thank you'. Emotional relatedness, on the other hand, refers to how people emotionally interact with each other. Grandin (2016) also explains that, as a high-functioning autistic person, she experiences emotions, for example, love, but not in the same way as many non-autistic people. She says that she has emotions, and they can be very strong when she experiences them, but her emotions are generally all in the present. Information is stored in the memory without associative emotions connected to it. However, this does not make her love any less valuable or intensely felt than that of other people. Moreover, Grandin (2016) also states that there are certain situations in which she can be very emotional because they are directly tied in to her whole sense of being, and what she does.

In the sense of social relatedness and verbal communication, not all people are social animals. However, as can be seen through Grandin's description and from my observations, learners still long for empathy and compassion, to be understood, accepted and loved. In this sense they long for the affiliation that Nussbaum (2006a:77) outlines in her Capabilities list: the capability of affiliation that is being able 'to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings' and to have 'the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation'. Furthermore, Grandin and Panek (2014) claim that the more an autistic child is surrounded by peers and adults in a positive and supportive environment, and the more happiness s/he derives from shared experiences, the more internal motivation to interact

develops as the individual feels valued and accepted. In this way, Nussbaum's idea of self-respect and non-humiliation as described above may be realised. However, difficulties with social attention may prevent an individual from sharing experiences described above and to discuss this I shall now turn to social motivation theory.

Social motivation theory

Brodkin *et al*. (2012) argue that social motivation is a powerful factor that guides human behaviour and that disruption of social motivational mechanisms may cause high-functioning autistic learners to experience difficulties in the classroom. The social motivation argument is based on the theory that impairments in social attention may deprive a person of adequate social learning experiences which, in turn, can disrupt the development of social skills and cognition. Learners may also find it difficult to connect experiences together or to connect them appropriately. Furthermore, from my professional observations, if an individual expects that her/his performance in a social situation will be inept, s/he may feel that this may be a blow to her/his social aspirations.

According to Chevalier *et al*. (2012) expectations that one's life will be ruined by a specific rejection or failure is rarely borne out by experience but, for many, the fear of this can be overwhelming. Even if negative consequences do not occur in a social situation, the individual may expect negative things to happen next time, having a detrimental effect on her/his self-esteem. In discussion with me, several learners have commented that they focus on any negative feedback and ignore or distrust positive feedback. One can tell by their demeanour that they long to feel valued but find it hard to accept that they may actually be of worth and value both to themselves and others. Coupled with obsessive and negative thoughts and catastrophizing, this may lead to a spiral of depression. Additionally, some

learners have told me that they choose to ignore negative feedback because they know that, as soon as the interaction ceases, they are back to facing social isolation, having only their own negative thoughts for company. They say that they feel that the avoidance of negative feedback is due to having been faced with nothing but negativity in the past so that, when someone comes along who admires or values them, they find this hard to accept. They may feel that the other agent has an ulterior motive such as manipulation. These experiences may lead to cynicism, withdrawal from interaction and social isolation.

Social Isolation

Although it is understood that some autistic learners may wish to be alone and enjoy their own company, social isolation can have a detrimental impact on an individual. Learners in my care have described feelings of loneliness and being locked in their own heads, with only their own thoughts for company. Social isolation can make learners feel they have no value in society, so their self-esteem, confidence and sense of self-worth can deteriorate. According to Cacioppo and Hawkley (2009), people who lack positive relationships are likely to experience various psychological disturbances from loneliness to depression and even physical pain. Moreover, the impact of social exclusion may lead to enhanced social motivation that consists of seeking others' approval and yearning to be accepted by groups in the community. This may result in the autistic person being attracted to or attracting unscrupulous people, making her/him particularly vulnerable if, for example, s/he lives in an area of active gang recruitment. At the very least, it may make a person a target of ridicule or bullying, especially if that person has a slightly different physical appearance or demeanour from other people. Barron (2016b) explains how he felt desperate to belong to a friendship group but was too afraid of making social errors and being ostracised.

> I was the perfect target for ridicule. Many of those who did not make life harder for me chose instead to avoid me as though I was a leper … I remember

> wanting desperately to win a reserved place in others' hearts, a desire largely incompatible with having heavy fear in my own heart. (Barron, 2016b:71-72)

Furthermore, in a study carried out by Maner *et al*. (2005), participants who experienced social exclusion searched for social interactions more than those that did not, and perceived others as more friendly than they may have been. A further complication is that deprivation of social contact can produce negative feelings that signal to the person that her/his needs are not being met. These unmet needs may cause a learner to search online for friendships and even romantic relationships, but developing an online relationship in which one person has not met the other is fraught with dangers, including being taken advantage of financially or developing relationships with others who have complex attachment issues. Indeed, during the lockdown periods of quarantine of 2020-21, many learners with whom I work developed such online relationships, not realising that, never having met or been in the other person's company, these were often not authentic relationships in the sense that one's online self is so curated and limited. According to Thomas (2021), people usually only display and share what they want to be seen or perceived online, and they have only an imagined view of what the other person is like, making it easy to develop an idealised view of them. Hence an online relationship may be seductive, especially to those with social skill difficulties. The internet creates a clever façade of virtual reality, but it is not reality and, over time, the virtual and actual worlds can become confounded, especially, for example, when a person is in quarantine and cannot socialise in the real world. This highlights the notion that trusting relationships in person in the classroom, relationships founded on empathy, understanding and compassion, may be key to helping the individual feeling more valued, enhancing self-esteem, and developing the capacity to tell whether a friendship is genuine or not. In this way friendships may be made through choice not necessity or desperation to fit in. This will be discussed further in Chapter Five but for now I turn to another contributory factor that may

add to the complexity in the navigation of social interaction and communication, external influences.

The social complexities of friendship, teacher feedback and sensory overload: causes of social self-isolation.

According to Bertilsdotter Rosqvist *et al*. (2015), many high-functioning autistic adults have few or no particular friends, and do not enjoy interaction for its own sake: it is as if every interaction requires a practical purpose to make sense. For example, not having seen a friend for several months, a high-functioning autistic learner may find that she needs to borrow a book from her. Instead of starting the message by enquiring how the other person is to indicate to the friend that her welfare is of value to her, she simply writes to ask if she can borrow the book. The friend is hurt by this but the high-functioning autistic learner cannot understand why the friend is offended. For the autistic person, the message had a practical purpose which was accomplished by asking to borrow the book. The autistic learner still loves her friend but does not see why it may be necessary to verbalise that affection when the purpose of the message is to borrow a book. From the friend's point of view, this person has not been in contact for several months, and when she does make contact, it is because she wants something from her: she is apparently not contacting her with any concern for her welfare and thus appears not to care about her and perhaps to be narcissistic or self-absorbed. The autistic person is only seeing things from her own perspective, not empathizing and not following the social norms of such situations. This may pose a difficulty for the high-functioning autistic person maintaining friendships over time, and she therefore needs an understanding friend who loves her unconditionally and accepts that the high-functioning autistic friend loves her back in whatever capacity her functioning allows. However, this may not be the conventionally accepted way of maintaining a reciprocal friendship. This

friendship does not rely on equal reciprocity in the conventional way. The autistic person may reciprocate friendship in a different way, for example through extreme loyalty. Kittay (2019:143) acknowledges this type of friendship as providing 'a particular type of closeness'. However, patience and attempts to understand each other will be required for this type of friendship to endure. Moreover, the nature of one person's reciprocity within a relationship of need may not be the same as another's in nature but may be equally if differently valuable to the reciprocating person or the wider community. For example, I can sacrifice my spare time helping a high-functioning autistic learner to work out a problem that is causing her/him anxiety. I know that the learner may not be able to reciprocate with the same type of support or give the same amount of time to me, but my having helped her/him to overcome her/his anxiety may make me feel good that I have helped another, and having helped another individual to study and obtain the qualifications to secure a good job and improve self-esteem and flourishing, might, in turn, benefit society. It is also, I suggest, an element of my professional responsibility. Moreover, the dignity of human life entitles the learner to support through interaction with others. According to Nussbaum, the human person is a:

> … dignified free individual who shapes his or her own life in co-operation and reciprocity with others, rather than being passively shaped or pushed around by the world in the manner of a flock or herd animal. (Nussbaum, 2001a:72)

Although, according to Barron and Grandin (2016), some high-functioning autistic learners prefer their own company and may need some time alone to recover if they feel overwhelmed, human interaction is still required so that the autistic learner may feel valued and supported as they find ways to navigate the world with a degree of autonomy.

Self-isolation may also be a coping strategy that the learner has developed to accommodate fear of, or because of, social rejection: s/he may feel that s/he has no choice but to become accustomed to having only her/his own company. Professional experience suggests that many

high-functioning autistic learners prefer to be on their own at times, but not indefinitely. This may be aggravated if the teacher has excluded the autistic learner from the classroom or a social situation as part of a punishment for behaviour perceived as unacceptable. Moreover, teachers may avoid giving high-functioning autistic learners the chance to participate in certain class group activities in an attempt not to make the learner feel pressured, based on misconceptions of the nature of autism and its effects on communication and interaction. It is therefore important that learners be given the opportunity to make a free choice as to whether they wish to participate in a group session and a fine balance needs to be struck between social interaction and time to be alone as required.

Furthermore, to fit in with a group or to be liked by another person, Chartrand and Lakin (2003), suggest that high-functioning autistic people both unconsciously and consciously mimic or mirror others and script or repeat what others have said in a different context. This is known as scripting. Scripting may also occur in an attempt to understand a situation or because the learner lacks an understanding of what is being said. In the classroom, scripting may have an impact on learning potential. The classroom teacher, especially in a large class, may mistake scripting for knowledge and then, when the learner writes an essay which does not reflect her/his scripting as shown in the classroom, the learner will be disappointed when s/he receives a low grade. As a result, the learner may switch off from learning as s/he may feel devalued and inadequate. In this respect, teacher feedback is of great importance. However, if there is an attitude of compassion on the part of the teacher, the learner may be able to demonstrate her/his capacity in other ways, such as by answering more closed questions.

Moreover, Brookfield (2015:186) emphasises the importance of starting with the positive aspects of an evaluation, highlighting the meritorious aspects of a learner's work and making her/him aware of her/his strengths and what needs further effort in order to improve it. In this way, the learner does not feel threatened but may be encouraged and accept constructive criticism as part of the learning journey. This is of particular significance to high-functioning autistic learners for whom negative feedback may be seen as yet another barrier they have failed to overcome and may add to a daily struggle exacerbated every time they get something wrong. If this occurs over a sustained period of time, then when the learner is given positive feedback s/he may be unable to accept it because s/he instantly perceives it as a criticism. S/he cannot accept positive comments about her/himself because if it is positive, it cannot be true and s/he may feel that the person giving the praise may have a manipulative agenda. Beck (1976) describes this as a type of magnifying and minimising, attributing importance to negative comments or events and ignoring or dismissing positive comments or events in a distorted manner, which is ultimately and incrementally detrimental to self-esteem and confidence. An added complexity are the external influences outside the classroom that may affect a high-functioning autistic learner in the classroom and it is to this that I now turn.

External influences

Influences outside the classroom may also contribute to anxiety for high-functioning autistic learners within the classroom as part of cumulative stress. For example, a lack of structure during undirected time between lessons or a sensory overload in the cafeteria at lunchtime can be challenging and transitions throughout the day, such as classroom changeovers or walking in crowded corridors, may be difficult. To remain calm in a noisy area that may be unpredictable, requires flexibility and effective executive functioning skills to make decisions, to spontaneously stop one activity and start another, and to organise and plan at

speed. Minahan and Rappaport (2012) argue that these are areas of functionality that high-functioning autistic learners may find difficult and they note that any small incident may trigger anxiety-induced behaviour. As the sixth from college environment is more unstructured than a school, with undirected times during the day and learners normally being allowed to leave the college premises when they do not have a class, there is an expectation that learners are able to be responsible for their own time management skills in preparation for university and employment. This environment may present autistic learners with challenges in these areas, and they might not seek help because of embarrassment or the fear of shame or stigma. All of the difficulties described above are exacerbated by constant attempts to blend in and function like a non-autistic person all day every day. This may take its toll on an autistic learner's energy and self-esteem, heightening anxiety and possibly making the learner feel unsafe in the college environment and it is to this that I now turn.

Feeling Safe: Empathy and Compassion

According to Beck, Emery *et al*. (1985), shame is one of the strongest emotional blocks to learning. Learning new skills often involves making mistakes and the learner who already feels different or even inadequate may be less likely to risk trying new things for fear of getting them wrong. This is exacerbated because a study by Davidson *et al*. (2017) indicates that high-functioning autistic learners are more prone to shame than non-autistic learners. This may be because of the complexity of emotions and an awareness of being different from other people, a difference that some may erroneously see as being less human, as discussed in Chapter Two. Barron (2016b) describes his experience of the classroom.

> Most of the time, I was corrected, yelled at, teased, tormented, ignored and shunned. All I knew was what I saw – consistent negative attention. The deduction was simple: Sean was bad. (Barron, 2016b:83)

A constant feeling of 'otherness' may cause exhaustion by the end of the day, increasing the chances of becoming overwhelmed to the point of not being able to physically or mentally function. Furthermore, Nussbaum (2001b) argues that shame involves an acknowledgement that one is weak and inadequate as it causes the real vulnerable self to hide and a more robotic and inauthentic false self to emerge, a self-playing a role to appear acceptable. In this way, a person can hide her/his apparent deficiencies. The need to hide deficiencies, Nussbaum (2001b) argues, is prompted by an inner need for security and a sense of well-being. To satisfy these needs a person must feel safe in their environment and with the people who surround them. A feeling of security and inner well-being may be provided by the interactions between the learner and the teacher in the classroom as well as in the family. This may include not only positive feedback and praise but understanding, or at least an attempt to understand or empathize. It also highlights why the classroom teacher should reflect upon the effects of her/his own behaviour and attitudes, both conscious and unconscious, on the learners in the classroom. This is particularly important for high-functioning autistic learners regarding their capacity to relate to the teacher socially, emotionally and to trust them, and to this I now turn to elucidate the complex relationship between a social, emotional and trusting connection.

Triggers of anxiety may diminish if the learner feels understood and supported, s/he is not afraid to make mistakes and s/he may be more prepared to challenge her/himself and move outside her/his comfort zone. Moreover, I have observed that when high-functioning autistic learners who feel safe and cared for by teachers are presented with opportunities for learning experiences that are both educational and entertaining, something special happens if the teacher undergoes the experience with the learners as a mutual learner. They reach outside their comfort zones and try new things and, consequently, both flourish. For example, my

colleague and I took the learners on a trip that was designed by my colleague to overcome anxiety. In the morning, we went to a meditation centre, where we tried a combination of mindfulness meditation and Tai Chi. The aim of this was to find out about coping strategies, which could then be used in the classroom, to overcome the overwhelming physical and psychological effects experienced in an anxiety-inducing situation. We tried these methods as a group and, although it appeared that many of us were self-conscious, we worked together. We shared our feelings about our experiences of anxiety and I sensed that our interactions with each other were generally non-judgemental, we were supportive of each other. In this way, our shared vulnerability did not appear to be a weakness but a strength as undergoing similar emotions meant that we could empathize with and support each other. In the afternoon, we put these newly-discovered strategies into practice in a simulated anxiety-inducing situation - Air Soft, a competitive team game in which participants eliminate opposing players with airsoft guns. Although, I approached this activity with trepidation, I went along with it. It was made clear to the learners that no one would be forced to take part if they did not wish to do so, but all chose to participate. We were led to a 1950s underground cold war bunker which was dark and cold. Following a safety briefing, we put on overalls and protective equipment which was tight and uncomfortable. For some autistic learners, many of whom are hyper-sensitive to touch and the external environment, this may in itself have been a source of anxiety. Once ready, we were led onto the mock battlefield, which was dark, ruinous and littered with burnt-out cars. The experience was intense. The masks and protective clothing were extremely hot and the sound of the pellets was very loud. Every twenty minutes there would be a break, allowing the group to remove their masks and have a drink. I was expecting the learners to be scared or to want to leave. Instead, something extraordinary happened: every learner had difficulties with verbal expression, making eye contact and relating to other people, but every time there was a break, instead of becoming

socially withdrawn or anxious, as they had often become in the classroom, they became more animated. Their verbal articulation became increasingly fluent, they made eye contact with their peers, my colleague and myself. They also discussed their feelings, sharing in their excitement. Not one was left out by their peers. They all supported each other and the more confident ones offered support to the less confident. They were showing each other empathy and compassion.

I could not believe that these were the same learners who had been described as withdrawn, depressed and socially self-isolating in their diagnoses and their EHC plans. On the way home, I asked the learners what they thought of their experience. The overwhelming consensus was that they had overcome their feelings of fear because they had undergone a nerve-wracking experience together. They also pointed out that the teachers had taken part as equals and that gave them strength and made them feel safe. By undertaking this exercise, they had felt that others understood how their feelings, that they might have been feeling the same, and that together we had overcome our feelings of anxiety. This feeling of support and acceptance, they said, gave them the strength to carry on.

After returning to college, in the ensuing weeks, the learners bonded with each other, with my colleague and myself. We had given each other strength by understanding, trusting and believing in each other. This recalls Nussbaum's (2006a:336) argument that the emotion of compassion, discussed in the next chapter, involves the thought that another being is suffering, not necessarily through any fault of her/his own, and that compassion entails being non-judgemental and able to walk on another's path. This is what I witnessed the learners doing on that trip. I believe that it is these qualities that may be found in successful working relationships between high-functioning autistic learners, their teachers and their peers both

inside and outside the classroom and that these are key to the flourishing of the individual and this will be discussed in the ensuing chapters. However, in order to understand the working relationship from a teacher's perspective, it is first necessary to discuss the pressures and challenges faced by teachers in the classroom.

The pressures and challenges teachers face in the classroom: working in a pressurised, standardised blame culture of accountability.

A study of 775 teachers in England carried out by Glazzard and Rose (2019) found that 81% reported that poor mental health negatively impacted on the quality of their relationships with learners and colleagues, with many seeking the support of medical services. Relatedly, Glazzard and Rose (2019) state that teachers' mental ill health has a detrimental impact on the quality of teaching and on learners' education and progress. Furthermore, they argue that teachers reported they felt they were irritable and had less patience with learners because of the way that they were feeling and they felt that this was making them less able to form positive relationships with learners. However, Glazzard and Rose (2019) contend that the main reason for this stress was not only the overbearing pressures of workload, but a punitive school culture, being micromanaged, not being trusted, and being held accountable for learner grades. The report also suggests that some teachers do not feel able to shape their job roles, to make mistakes and learn from them, and they do not feel they are in control of their profession. Moreover, there appears to be no acknowledgement of the complexities of the human experience within a school or college environment. This is the neoliberal, utilitarian and meritocratic pedagogical culture of scrutiny and surveillance which I outlined in Chapter Three.

According to Richardson (2005), neoliberalism is committed to the privatisation and commodification of public services including education. As discussed in Chapter Three, notions of productivity, standardisation, performance, measurability and accountability, created by neoliberal policy based upon finance and a free-market economy, have permeated social policy including the education system in a detrimental way. Education should be to a certain extent spontaneous and flow naturally, I contend, because it evolves from the interaction between the learner and the teacher and their unique perspectives. However, a neoliberal education system that focuses on employability skills, follows standardised curricular and is based on memory recall in examinations does not often encourage learning and discussion between the teacher and learner to take place spontaneously. Moreover, it does not provide a learning environment in which learners, including high-functioning autistic learners, can thrive with their divergent and spontaneous thinking. Their thinking follows all sorts of innovative and creative directions, but in a standardised skills driven education system, this can be stifled.

Furthermore, the competitive neoliberal education system has created a working environment of anxiety, fear and distrust. We should surely never forget that everyone we are dealing with is a human being first and a professional second and we need to move away from a culture of blame. Teachers who are stressed and fearful cannot flourish. I suggest that we need to show compassion to teachers in order that they can do their job properly. This would entail listening to each other. When people feel pressurised, they may feel threatened and anxious and this can lead to fear and anger. When emotions such as these are felt by both learner and teacher, and these emotions are evident in the classroom, the learning environment can become an arena for confrontational situations between teachers and learners. Moreover, teachers, especially those who are not trained specialists or are new to the profession, may

suffer from impostor syndrome, which can compound feelings of inadequacy when working with high-functioning autistic learners, and it is to this I now turn.

Impostor Syndrome

In education, Impostor Syndrome occurs when teachers privately think that they do not really deserve to be taken seriously as competent professionals and when they simply 'muddle through' as best they can. According to Brookfield (2015), many teachers wear an external mask of control when underneath they are struggling to appear competent to those around them. This disposition then makes the teacher vulnerable to self-criticism, struggling to achieve a prescribed idea of perfection, which may be destructive in itself. Additionally, Brookfield (2015:2) emphasises how teaching is 'riddled with irresolvable dilemmas and complex uncertainties'. These dilemmas include striking the right balance between supporting and challenging learners and creating activities that simultaneously address all learning styles and cultural and religious diversity, whilst adhering to a set curriculum. Furthermore, in order to develop as a teacher, one needs to be prepared to experiment. However, with experimentation comes a risk of failure. Failure is an important concomitant of growth and innovation as a teacher because it is through failure that we can discern what does and does not work. Hence teachers should not be of the view that they can get it right the first time. If failure is accepted as part of the evolutionary journey of a teaching professional, the feeling of impostorship loses its power. Moreover, if teachers teach their learners that failure is part of the richness of life's journey, it can provide valuable lessons for all and learners and teachers may become less afraid of taking risks and trying new experiences in order to develop. However, a lack of understanding of the nature of autism may also contribute to a feeling of impostorship on the part of the teacher and it is to this that I now turn.

A lack of understanding of autism: inclusion phobia and unconscious bias.

Sometimes the impediment to a learner developing social skills lies as much with the perspectives of the adult trying to teach the learner as with the lack of social insight the learner brings into the interaction. It may be hard for non-autistic teachers to see the world through the perspective of a high-functioning autistic learner. This may be compounded by teachers seeing the world through their own filters, based upon the societal and cultural norms in which they live and by which they are conditioned. Such norms interact with emotion and I return to this in Chapter Five. I have observed some teachers who do not judge, but who are patient and truly listen rather than making assumptions about a person based on their perceptions of the behaviour of that person. Others, however, especially when disciplining a learner judged to be behaving badly, make assumptions about a learner's behaviour, rather than looking for an underlying reason for the perceived poor behaviour in ways that might address the learner's needs. For example, if a learner shouts at a teacher due to a sensory overload and anxiety, the learner might well be punished for unacceptable behaviour. The learner's behaviour is deemed as unacceptable or odd because it has been judged to be unacceptable by the social norms created by those in power and these, of course, influence the teacher's judgement and perception. Such an environment may diminish a teacher's feeling of not being able to understand autism or a fear of not being able to support a learner effectively, in other words, it may overcome the inclusion phobia to which I now turn.

According to Goodey and Robinson (2017:427), the term 'inclusion phobia' accounts for the 'extreme out group' including learning difference and disability 'for whom discrimination and segregation are justifiable by general societal agreement, on apparently objective grounds'. These societal agreements may be borne out of societal conditioning through

habitus as outlined earlier and this may contribute to unconscious bias, that is the unconscious belief held by an individual about various social and identity groups plus a lack of understanding of hidden disabilities. People make assumptions about others and make judgements about their perceived behaviour based on often-erroneous assumptions. These biases, according to Navarro (2020), stem from one's tendency to organise social worlds by categorizing. Unconscious bias is often incompatible with one's conscious values, such as being empathetic and compassionate and avowedly supporting inclusion, and it may be more prevalent when working under pressure, including in the classroom. This is a real danger for classroom teachers with Goodey and Robinson (2017:431) arguing that the Children and Families Act 2014, discussed earlier in Chapter Two, '… continues to permit denial of the right of admission on the grounds of cost or "impact" on other pupils'. This, they claim reinforces inclusion phobia within schools and colleges and promotes a view that a child or young person with a disability, including a hidden disability such as high-functioning autism, is 'cognitively incomplete'. Furthermore, they suggest that, for many classroom teachers, the term Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) carries with it much responsibility as well as fear of the unknown. Goodey and Robinson (2017:436) argue that a SEND label that is associated with medical facts and that follows a static diagnosis requiring specialist support strategies may trigger feelings of anxiety and panic in the classroom teacher, presenting that teacher with seemingly unsurmountable psychological challenges. They argue that this type of fear is one emanating from 'the urge to preserve a system that runs on fixed diagnoses from contamination by a reality that is fluid' (Goodey and Robinson, 2017:436). Diagnoses appear to be fixed and labelling follows which then creates a stereotype. However, each person is constantly evolving and thus cannot be defined by a diagnosis with a list of static strategies that may 'fix' the person's so-called deficiencies.

Additionally, according to Goodey and Robinson (2017), psychological definitions in medical books and government policy such as ‘learning disability’ or ‘autism’ change over time, in accordance with research development. They argue that these definitions are not natural scientific entities and their prevalence is contingent upon the historically shifting anxieties viewed as acceptable or unacceptable by dominant groups in society. This situation presents a dilemma. On the one hand a label such as a diagnosis cannot really represent a complex and evolving human being who is complete as a person without that diagnosis. On the other hand, without a diagnosis that person’s condition may be left unrecognised and so support is not given. This difficulty, I argue, is at least partly compounded by a standardised, authoritarian approach to education. For instance, Minahan and Rappaport (2012) argue that traditional behavioural plans, for example, positive and negative behavioural points and reward and punishment support plans, are often ineffective because the learners’ processing and other difficulties will not be improved by any reward or punishment. At the same time, Dix (2017) argues that educational institutions adopt cultures of ‘zero tolerance’ for behaviour perceived as unacceptable by society and this can lead to significant increases in confrontations. Authoritarian and punitive attitudes and measures can also limit authentic and exciting behavioural practice and so be oppressive and prevent creativity and flair. By contrast, Dix (2017) suggests that a consistency rooted in kindness and tolerance provides a solid foundation to nurture individual creativity and flourishing. For the learners in focus here, such a learning environment, needs to be one in which teachers have an understanding of the nature of high-functioning autism and how it may affect individuals in different ways. Furthermore, educators do not often recognise anxiety triggers in the classroom and many unintentionally exacerbate the learner’s anxiety by placing pressure on the learner to perform and conform. In the case of high-functioning autistic learners who are often very

academically able, there can be a great deal of pressure to perform placed on the learner and the teacher may be focused on departmental performance grades and individual attainment.

It has been widely documented that teachers' beliefs about learners' abilities, which include stereo-typing, affect their teaching practices. The phenomenon of behaving and achieving in ways that confirm the expectations of others is known as the Pygmalion effect, as described by Jacobson and Rosenthal (2003). They argue that the teacher's belief and expectation that a learner is capable of achievement has a positive effect on the learner's own effort and belief in her/his own capacity to achieve. Learners need to believe that their teachers believe that they are capable of achievement and have high expectations of them. However, there needs to be a balance. The teacher should not assume that the learner can attain an end goal alone and s/he should not be left to struggle. Learners who are high-functioning academically but find it difficult to function on an emotional and social level have reported that they are either left to their own devices because it is assumed by the teacher that they are capable or are patronised because they have been labelled as disabled.

Furthermore, Goodey and Robinson (2017) argue that labelling and stereotyping focus on a 'notionally extreme out-group' for whom discrimination and segregation are justifiable by general societal or institutional agreement on apparently objective grounds. For example, several learners are selected to go on a nine-week work experience programme but the institution refuses to allow any high-functioning autistic learner such a placement. An erroneous assumption is made that the learner would not be able to access support and would therefore be incapable of carrying out certain tasks requiring cognitive skills, despite the learner being a high achiever academically. This is discrimination, considering people as either valuable or non-valuable commodities stemming, I would argue, from an idealised type

of normality, a striving for meritocratic perfection that does not exist as discussed in Chapter Three, and which breeds a fear or phobia of people who may be different from the perceived norm. Moreover, the American Psychiatric Association (2013:78) defines inclusion phobia as an underlying fear of 'contamination from other people' socially and institutionally as well as individually. Going further, Nussbaum (2001b:221) argues that fear of contamination from other people represents a type of disgust of people who are seen to be different and this, of course, poses a threat to the idea of the 'equal worth and dignity of persons'. She continues that shame and disgust are connected to an unwillingness or inability to accept one's situation as a needy animal, as a vulnerable being and I argue that this resistance to acknowledging and embracing one's own as well as others' vulnerability breeds fear.

It is the emotion of fear, which Beck *et al*. (1985) argue is hard wired into humans from birth as a survival mechanism. Moreover, Nussbaum (2018) argues that fear is connected to, and renders toxic, other emotions such as suspicion, anger, blame, envy and disgust. She also claims that fear blocks rational deliberation, poisons hope and impedes constructive co-operation for a better future. In other words, fear impedes a person's flourishing. People tend to be fearful when they feel out of control or powerless. For a high-functioning autistic learner in the classroom, this may be because s/he is afraid of misinterpreting a social cue or another's emotion, meaning that s/he may make an inappropriate response in a conversation and either get into trouble or insult someone. Consequently, s/he worries about how s/he is perceived by others. For a teacher, fear may be experienced about not being seen as competent by senior management and colleagues if their learners do not achieve their target grades.

Beck, Emery *et al*. (1985) argue that fear of being vulnerable is at the core of anxiety and may cause a person to believe they lack the necessary skills to cope with a particular threat or that person might downgrade their own abilities. There may be a sense of impotence and consequent panic which can result in blaming outsider groups or other people. For example, if an autistic learner is finding the classroom and the pressures within it too stressful, s/he may manifest anxiety by shouting out, stimming (for example, rocking backwards and forwards) or refusing to co-operate. This is because s/he does not know how to express anxiety and frustration verbally. The teacher may see the learner's behaviour as unruly and take it as a personal insult, thinking that the learner does not respect her/him as a teacher, perhaps because the learner thinks that s/he is not good. This image may be compounded by other pressures the teacher is feeling, for example, if the teacher has received negative feedback from a lesson observation. The teacher may then react in a defensive fashion towards the learner, taking an authoritarian approach, which s/he may feel commands respect. If the learner already has low self-esteem, s/he may have been expecting to make an error, seeing her/himself as inherently worthless. In turn, s/he may become frustrated and blame the teacher or her/his peers and so the vicious and complex emotional cycle of fear and anxiety continues and intensifies. Nussbaum (2018:6) suggests that fear 'has a way of running ahead of careful thought' and makes the critical point that fear induces a:

> … stampede to hasty action, prompted by insecurity… Fear of that sort undermines fraternity, poisons cooperation, and makes us do things we are deeply ashamed of later. (Nussbaum, 2018:6)

Furthermore, Nussbaum (2011) also likens a human being to a plant rather than a jewel in that a plant is fragile but its beauty is inseparable from its fragility. I argue that it is this fragility, this vulnerability and fear of the unknown, this human characteristic of both autistic and non-autistic people alike, that causes so much anxiety in the world. However, the acceptance and acknowledgement of this vulnerability could also provide a sense of

solidarity: it could enable two people to bond emotionally as it can be an emotion that is shared through empathy and trust. But trust is undermined by fear, for some to the extent of seeing the other person as a threat to their own well-being and safety and the achievement of their goals in life and so aggressive behaviour may be seen as an attempt to communicate an unmet need. Fear often leads to a person building a wall of self-protection, suspicion and distrust. All too often we do not stop to think about what our words and actions mean to others, including learners. We become caught up in life's daily struggles and the hegemonic pressures of education policy and accountability. The teacher and the learner need to be courageous in admitting their vulnerability to each other, for example, not being afraid of admitting that each of us makes mistakes and that errors are part of the rich tapestry of life that teaches us and helps us grow. For it is only in overcoming fear that people grow and flourish and so it is our role as teachers to work out how to foster trust, both with our learners and our colleagues.

To summarize this chapter, social and processing impairments may be explained as difficulties in understanding the intricate and sometimes subtle complexities of the social world and high-functioning learners, which can result in loss of interest in social interaction. The possible impact of this may be a deterioration in communication skills, an increase in disruptive behaviour, withdrawal from social groups, social isolation and even depression with sanctions and punishments largely ineffective. This chapter has also highlighted the importance of understanding and embracing emotions, a theme I expand on in the next chapter. This calls attention to my third concern, that a tension-laden classroom driven by economic imperatives, focused on achievement and apparently measurable employability skills, tends to undervalue the importance of emotions in education and with respect to the flourishing of the individual. If, however, teachers attempt to understand how autistic learners

think, then a social safety net can be established upon which the learner can develop a relationship of trust with the teacher. In this way s/he may build upon her/his existing social skills and develop an understanding of the more subtle complexities of social relationships. The negative life experiences that many high-functioning autistic learners undergo frequently result in feelings of being misunderstood, creating low self-esteem, anxiety and social isolation. The learner then focuses on negatives, expecting the worst, creating what Beck at al. (1985) term cognitive distortions, ignoring positives and predicting failure whilst repeatedly entering friendships with people who do not have their interests at heart. High-functioning autistic learners therefore need to develop effective working relationships with their teachers in order to counteract such feelings of distrust and being misunderstood.

By providing the learner with support through a working relationship of trust, teachers become care givers to high-functioning autistic learners in that they are addressing the needs for care that Nussbaum (2006a:98) asserts must be addressed: 'education, self-respect, activity and friendship'. In arguing that an adequate account of human justice needs to recognise the equal citizenship of people considered to have impairments, she suggests that this justice also requires the acknowledgement that there are many varieties of dependency that all humans experience in one way or another. We share vulnerability and the need for support and friendship as part of the human condition. Empathetic and compassionate working relationships can provide a platform for care and support and high-functioning autistic learners can provide support for their teachers by providing a unique perspective on life. There have been many times when I have been worried about a situation and an autistic learner has shown me a different, more pragmatic, way of looking at a situation, alleviating my own anxiety.

With dangerously low levels of trust and self-esteem, learners who require the most love and compassion are often the ones who will ask for it in the most unloving of ways and this can test teacher patience, especially in a pressurised environment such as today's classroom. It is therefore vital that teachers are aware of and reflect upon the external pressures within which they are working. Moreover, and with particular respect to the learners in focus in this Dissertation, teachers deserve opportunities to reflect on their own personal beliefs and limitations in their knowledge of the nature of autism, about their pre-conceptions including unconscious bias and about how these factors may influence their own behaviour towards learners in the classroom. Moreover, it is vital to understand that key to supporting high-functioning autistic learners and encouraging appropriate behaviour is to get to know the learner and her/his unique way of thinking, communicating and knowing.

O'Brien (2016) suggests that all negative behaviour communicates an unmet need and that positive behaviour needs to be explicitly taught and modelled as learners may understand it. In the college where I work, this is carried out by using the Capabilities Approach and adopting Positive Niche Construction as its practical application. This is discussed in detail in Chapter Six. However, at this point, I will address my third concern, that the standardised, meritocratic and commodified education system within which the current framework for support for high-functioning autistic learners sits ignores the importance of the role of emotions in the classroom and erodes working relationships. Both emotions and the relationship between the high-functioning autistic learner and the teacher are, I argue, central to the education and flourishing of both the learner and the teacher, whose flourishing are intertwined. I will therefore examine the relationship between emotions and the concept of a person's flourishing in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five: The role of emotions and trust in working relationships in the classroom and individual flourishing through the lens of the Capabilities Approach.

> Friendship [is] an act of recognition and belonging … in this love, you are Understood as you are without mask or pretension.
>
> *Anam Cara*, John O'Donohue (1997:35;36)

The above quote is taken from O'Donohue's book *Anam Cara* (1997) which aims to encapsulate the values at the heart of the ancient Celtic concept of a 'soul friend' or *Anam Cara*, a teacher, companion or spiritual guide who strives to be understanding, compassionate and empathetic. I would suggest that these are indeed the characteristics of a good teacher and are evident in the way that the specialist support teacher referred to earlier in this Dissertation relates to learners. O'Donohue (1997) suggests that for the Celts, on an ontological level, the exercise of compassion is the bringing together of matter and spirit, body and soul, human and divine, person and nature, creating a sense of solidarity amid human diversity. In this chapter, I argue that, as part of this diversity, the learner and the teacher may be connected as 'soul friends'. I also contend that our current standardised and utilitarian education system, as discussed in Chapter Three, is not only artificially dividing humanity into beings of greater or lesser value, but is also cutting us off from our emotions, our inner selves, the lifeblood of who we are. It is inculcating societal values that judge externally, materialistically and punitively with devastating effects on self-esteem and happiness.

Moreover, I contend that the dictates of cultural and societal norms interfere with the natural flow and beauty of human interconnected diversity by preventing people from following and valuing their own natural order and individuality, including those who think in a different

way, such as high-functioning autistic learners. In this chapter, I address my third concern, that a tension-laden classroom that focuses on achievement and employability can undervalue the role of emotions in relation to the flourishing of the individual in the classroom. Moreover, and as suggested in the previous chapter, working in such a pressurised environment can compound anxiety on both the part of the teacher and the learner. The resulting anxiety for the teacher may be exacerbated by the fear associated with being held accountable for the support of high-functioning autistic learners in accordance with the SEND Code of Practice: 0 – 25 Years (2015). There is a danger that a highly anxious teacher may be so pre-occupied with these fears that s/he becomes obsessed with 'doing what is right' according to written lists disseminated by senior management instead of trusting her/himself and her/his intuition. S/he may also be less likely to listen to the learner. In this way, support and inclusion in the classroom becomes mechanistic: a bureaucratic and externally imposed culture is adopted. I argue that the Capabilities Approach may provide an alternative type of education incorporating the very qualities of *anam cara* - empathy and compassion, and valuing the flow and diversity of human nature and enabling true dialogue. As learner and teacher get to know each other, trust each other and teach each other, they might both begin to flourish in a learning partnership.

In this chapter and following the ideas of Nussbaum on emotions and her version of the Capabilities Approach, I will discuss love, empathy and compassion as the antidote to the emotions of fear, anxiety and distrust, and as key elements in establishing and maintaining relationships of trust between high-functioning autistic learners, their peers and their teachers. These relationships may improve mutual understanding and lead to the empowerment and flourishing of the individual, enabling progress towards a better world that values diversity and learners for their own sake. Firstly, I will discuss Nussbaum's philosophical view of the

complex relationship between emotion, the self and the external world. I will argue, following Nussbaum, that embracing one's own vulnerability, as discussed in previous chapters, as well as one's inner-feelings is fundamental to both the flourishing of the self and of others. Additionally, I will suggest that creative thought and imagination are key factors in developing emotional awareness and perspective. I will also discuss other influences on emotion and perception which Nussbaum argues are central to self-image, such as social influences and how societal judgement and influence may lead to distorted thinking and an unrealistic, negative view of the self.

Secondly, I will outline the role of emotion in human flourishing or *eudaimonia*, defined by Nussbaum (2001b) who follows Aristotle in conceptualising flourishing as living a life worthy of human dignity and living it to the best of one's individual potential in a diverse number of ways. This will be accompanied by a discussion of the concepts of *agape*, unconditional love and compassion, and *philia*, the brotherly or sisterly love of two people for each other for their own sakes, rather than for their utility or pleasure. These qualities are key to productive relationships of trust for high-functioning autistic learners in particular, not least because their self-esteem, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, may be fragile. This discussion will build on the argument made in Chapter Two, that one's own flourishing is intertwined with another's and that, ultimately, compassion is linked to intrinsic motivation which is intertwined with feeling that we have value, autonomy and purpose. In order to understand why the emotions of love, empathy and compassion are so central to working relationships of trust, I shall first outline how emotion, vulnerability and dignity are intertwined in human nature, building on my argument on vulnerability in Chapter Four. Specifically, the acknowledgement of mutual vulnerability and dignity may be used to build relationships between teachers, high-functioning autistic learners, and their peers, as a way to

help high-functioning autistic learners feel understood, socially accepted and able to flourish. However, in order to nurture dignity while acknowledging vulnerability, I argue that it is necessary to be emotionally literate and aware of one's own beliefs, emotions and perceptions and how these interplay in working relationships with learners. Hence, I now consider the relationship of emotion and perception.

Emotion and perception

From a psychological perspective, Cowen *et al*. (2019) suggest that an individual's thoughts borne out of emotion reflect her/his perception of what is real or true, which becomes her/his reality whether it is true or not. Thoughts in turn create emotions, which motivate actions to address perceived reality. If this is the case, reality is the observable subjective product of an individual's thoughts about what is real or true regarding her/himself, other people, circumstances, and the world rather than the speculations of philosophy or the pontifications of, for example, faith. It is therefore important to remember that our own reality is not always what others perceive as their reality. Because high-functioning autistic learners are often trying to make sense of a world in which complexities and nuances are confusing and anxiety inducing, negative past life experiences may have a significant influence on reactions to a situation, including situations in classrooms.

Kristjansson (2007:18) suggests that perceptions and beliefs are an intrinsic part of emotion, affecting our judgements and borne of the emotions or feelings we experience first as children and later as adults. If this is so, then emotions and thoughts, as well as other possible factors such as our neurobiological dispositions, will influence our lives, how we form our identities, and the way in which we view the world. When people have negative views of themselves then many life situations may pose a threat because the possibility of performing

inadequately can render people vulnerable to negative self-evaluations and rejections, as discussed in Chapter Three. In the classroom, this may manifest itself in constant searching for affirmation and approval or interpersonal confrontation with a teacher, peer or group, or the subjection of the individual to an immediate evaluation of her/his capacity. Such confrontations involve factors central to an individual's perceived competence in dealing with problematic situations, her/his capacity to gain the respect and acceptance of her/his individuality, and her/his rights as an individual. For example, if a learner is laughed at because s/he made a comment that was viewed by others as socially inappropriate in a history class, s/he may be reluctant to attend a history class at a future date because s/he fears that other learners will view her as odd. Even if others are not judging, s/he may judge her/his own performance harshly and consequent low self-confidence may result in anxiety and fatigue, which also can affect a sense of control, resulting in dwelling on the worst possible outcome and lowered performance. Such anxiety can affect the capacity for the individual to express her/himself clearly in the classroom, which may in turn affect her/his actions and further reduce self-confidence, causing the learner to become stuck in a vicious cycle and making her/his vulnerability very observable to others. The learner's negative perception of vulnerability may develop into a feeling of hopeless ineffectuality, which may result in the learner leaving classes, not completing or attempting tasks and abandoning goals, and eventually resulting in depression.

Nussbaum's central capabilities support emotional attachment and can remove overwhelming factors such as fear and anxiety. According to Nussbaum (2001b:3), when we recognize the connection between human emotion and capability and its complex interplay between people, emotions become:

> … not just the fuel that powers the psychological mechanism of a reasoning creature, they are parts, highly complex and messy parts, of this creature's reasoning itself. (Nussbaum, 2001b:3)

Emotions are intertwined with a person's very essence of functioning and existence. An individual's emotions embody her/his appraisals or value judgements pertaining to things and persons in and outside their control, and which may have great importance for that person's flourishing. Nussbaum's fifth Capability is based on emotions, defined as:

> Being able to have attachment to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us … not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Nussbaum, 2006a:76-77)

Autistic learners may be highly intuitive and reactive to emotions and their feelings may change and fluctuate rapidly and, of course, may be different at different stages of life. Grandin and Panek (2014) explain that emotions can be very intense and, as an example of this, say that when being treated badly, Grandin may experience anger or sadness at the time of the event and that, depending upon the intensity of emotion, the feeling may remain with her for a few days. I have observed that high-functioning autistic learners at the college may be very perceptive at judging people's emotions. They appear to intuitively pick up on a person's negative energy, just by walking into a room. When a learner is already anxious about getting a social situation wrong, picking up on another's negative emotions may make the feeling of anxiety even more intense. Additionally, however, the learners with whom I work may miss emotions just as we all do and anxiety can make that worse and if they have the negative self-perceptions that I discussed earlier, it may lead to misinterpretation.

Additionally, Barron and Grandin (2016:xiii) claim that for high-functioning autistic learners who feel emotional-relatedness, social connectedness is a centrally motivating factor. They further observe that the high-functioning autistic learner can express emotions and make her/his needs and wants known through emotional channels, describing a process of the

learner ‘feeling out’ her/his world through a sense of social-emotional connection based on trust. They also argue that such learners are deeply affected when their world is out of synchronisation with a world they are accustomed to. This was the situation in which many of the learners with whom I work found themselves during the COVID-19 lock-down periods of socially isolating home quarantine from January 2020. At college, the learners are usually free to move around, to be around people if they want to be, or to be alone if they so choose. They can speak to a support tutor if they are worried, anxious or afraid or if they want to share a personal achievement or good news. When those incidental real-world interactions that are usually taken for granted and may help high-functioning autistic learners to navigate the world around them, their interactions and their relationships with others were removed, those learners were in danger of becoming despondent, depressed and full of fear. This may be because in a lockdown situation, the autistic learner, may have few people if any to help her/him make a judgement, especially if s/he withdraws to her/his bedroom as many autistic learners that I teach and their families reported that they did. The people that they trust such as teachers to help them navigate daily life are not present to help them make informed judgements and decisions, making them vulnerable to unscrupulous people on the internet and parents reported that their daughters/sons were often reluctant to let them see what they were doing on the internet, resulting in arguments. This bears out my contention that being able to trust another and knowing that they will be accepted for who they are without judgement in a safe and nurturing educational environment is vital to the feeling of safety and confidence for the high-functioning autistic individual in the classroom.

Furthermore, when humans become aware of their emotions and how they affect their judgements, values and perceptions, they become more aware of how they interact with each

other. I argue that this awareness is fundamental in the development of empathy with and compassion for others and that it enables the capacity to listen effectively to another person. In my own teaching context, I have observed that some of the most effective learning experiences for learners are when teachers tap into the emotions of their learners by sharing their own life experiences and narratives. For example, I encountered one high-functioning autistic learner who was in a spiral of severe depression. The specialist teacher discussed with him his own journey of pain and suffering, embodying O'Donohue's (1997) illustration of *Anam Cara* or the 'soul friend', while of course, maintaining appropriate boundaries. For example, the teacher shared enough of the experience for the learner to see that the teacher understood and could empathize with him but at the same time the teacher did not share all of the details of his own experience so that he himself felt uncomfortable or did not appear to be unprofessional. Through the teacher sharing his own experience, the learner then realised that he was not alone in his experiences. Over the ensuing weeks, the learner's demeanour appeared to improve as did his attendance at classes and his motivation and he completed work to a high standard. This indicates that when people feel understood and that they are not the only person feeling as they do, they feel valued, hopeful and their self-esteem can increase. When anxiety is removed, and is replaced with self-confidence learners, who are often very academically able, can improve their grades. I therefore argue that it is the unifying of experience and empathy that creates emotional connection and enables both the learner and teacher to flourish. The teacher, by having the courage to demonstrate his own vulnerability, may have been able to reconcile himself to his own negative past experiences because, if he had not undergone those experiences, he might not have been in such an effective position to help the learner. Furthermore, it might help the teacher find closure on his own past and thus may assist his own flourishing. In this way the teacher and the learner's flourishing are intertwined. However, a careful balance needs to be struck between sharing

experiences and maintaining a professional distance and this needs careful navigation. Moreover, teachers may not wish to share their own experiences, but a clear message that the teacher is willing to listen to the learner and value her/his opinion and preferences may help the learner to overcome barriers and feel empowered. When listening to learners, it is important that the teacher is aware of her/his own assumptions and biases that may affect her/his reaction towards the learner and so it is to societal influence on emotion and perception that I now turn.

Emotion, perception and societal influence

Nussbaum (2000) suggests that our emotions, values and moral judgements are influenced in part by inter-social differences that depend on where we come from.

> Emotions are only as reliable as the evaluations they contain, and because such evaluations of objects are frequently absorbed from society, they will only be as reliable as those social norms. (Nussbaum, 2000:73)

In other words, our perceptions are shaped by the reactions of other members of the society in which we live. Additionally, Bourdieu (1977), referred to in Chapter One discusses the idea of habitus, whose origins are both experiential and sociological. Bourdieu (1977) argues that we are deemed to be free agents, yet our daily decisions are based upon assumptions about the perceived predictability, behaviour and attitude of others. Our perceptions, feelings and practices are shaped and conditioned by past and present circumstances such as family upbringing and educational experiences and what is deemed acceptable behaviour by society, a society whose rules and norms have been created by those in power. For the learners in focus here, it is against this backdrop that I have previously discussed in Chapter Three, that accepts one way of being human that they are misunderstood, misjudged and sometimes mistreated.

Nussbaum (2001b) highlights various sources of generally accepted social norms and variations. Firstly, there are physical conditions. For example, the learners at the college where I work are from many different groups with differing beliefs and values influenced by ethnicity, class, religion and economic status. Some learners at the college have more opportunities for leisure and education than others depending upon parental income. Members of such a family are not preoccupied with survival, so their minds are free to concentrate on other activities such as study, leisure pursuits and gaining new life experiences. In contrast, a single parent who has a disabled child and lives in an overcrowded flat on a council estate with a high crime rate is likely to be much more preoccupied with survival, will probably have less residual income, and may even have to hold two or three jobs to make ends meet, with less time to spend with the children and their education. There would also be the emotional toll on this family's mental well-being of having to live in such conditions. These examples may appear as stereotypical extremes, but I have seen that some learners at the college live in high-rise flats in estates in London where there are high levels of inequality and crime such as Peckham or Camberwell. Learners from these areas may be particularly vulnerable because some have reported facing pressure to join gangs, commit crime or are bullied. This adds another layer of complexity to how high-functioning autistic learners may be perceived by others or how they may socially function in reaction to the environment around them.

Additionally, teachers themselves come from a wide variety of cultures and societies and may have differing beliefs regarding disability and learning differences. The high-functioning autistic learner may have completely different emotional experiences with teachers from different cultural backgrounds. The classroom, therefore, may potentially be a place where cultural and societal beliefs and values may clash. This may be compounded by different

interpretations of facial expressions and non-verbal cues which may or may not be shaped by societal norms and may signal an alternative to what the person is saying verbally. For the high-functioning autistic learner, this may be very confusing and anxiety inducing. This highlights the complex interactions between the emotion, experiences and contextualised societal and cultural influences on the individual.

Equally the classroom, if engineered by a compassionate and empathetic teacher, may be a forum in which societal and cultural differences may be discussed and where similarities between cultures can be identified. Furthermore, Nussbaum (2001b:170) suggests that some concepts may prove 'unavailable to us, in the sense that we cannot well imagine what it would be for us to have the[se] concepts'. This may especially be the case for high-functioning autistic learners, who may think in a divergent and creative way. Furthermore, the way in which autistic learners perceive and value emotions, as described by Grandin and Panek (2014) in Chapter Four may also be classified as a type of cultural difference that might usefully be addressed in the classroom through dialogue.

The second source of social variation that Nussbaum (2001b) describes relates to metaphysical, religious and cosmological beliefs: shaping emotional life and often reflecting the ways in which children are brought up. For the child this may be either a positive or negative experience. For instance, if a learner belongs to a religious organisation that values diversity and the dignified uniqueness of the individual, then s/he may value and celebrate who s/he is and have high self-esteem. On the other hand, if a learner belongs to a fundamentalist religious group that does not recognise or value human diversity, s/he may not flourish because s/he may be told that s/he is not worthy or even that s/he is being punished for her/his sins in a past life, as I have heard a learner say. S/he may also be brought up with

views that discriminate against groups in society such as women, and believe these views to be truths.

The third societal difference is language, although this may be difficult to measure. Nussbaum (2001b) observes that language is a source of difference when it classifies things together that would usually be classified separately. For example, the word love in English has many different meanings in different contexts ranging from platonic, sisterly or brotherly love to erotic love and compassion. There is one word for a vast range of very different types of emotion. In contrast, the Greek language has seven different words for different types of love. May (2011) describes *eros* which is erotic love, *philia* which is the type of love found in a platonic friendship, *storge*, a type of familial love, *agape* or universal love, *ludus* which is playful or uncommitted love, *pragma* or love founded on duty and one's longer-term interests, and *philantia* or self-love. By having different words to express differing concepts of love, there is an implication that in Greek society importance is placed on each of these concepts as valuable in itself and meriting its own word. This may have an effect on emotion and how a person processes and perceives the world. For example, a Greek speaker may have a much clearer understanding and speak more freely of the different types of love than an English speaker in whose linguistic culture there is an historical taboo against expressing deep emotion such as love. Hence having one word for many types of love may create ambiguity in understanding the concept of love itself. For adolescent high-functioning autistic learners who are coming to terms with their identity and discovering different types of love and who take words and their meanings literally, this may be confusing. I have observed that this confusion can lead to the misunderstanding of both platonic and potential romantic relationships with others. Furthermore, Nussbaum goes on to suggest that:

> … social constructions of emotion are transmitted through parental cues, actions, and instructions, long before the larger society shapes the child. (Nussbaum, 2001b:173)

This includes the language that they use with the child. Parents will have been influenced by the culture, religion and beliefs of the societies in which they themselves were brought up, or in which they live, and this will have an effect on how they instruct their children in the home. This highlights the importance of the recognition and understanding of an individual learner's context and the need for an awareness of the influences of the drivers previously discussed in the learner's life.

Current standardised SEND legislation and policy allows this important underlying factor to be overlooked, as Education Health and Care plans (EHCPs) and termly learning plans have 'cut and paste' standardised, and often somewhat ambiguous, strategies and outcomes. However, an understanding of all the factors that influence a learner's life and her/his perception of it is essential to ensuring that the learner's psychological, intellectual and emotional context and starting point enables the educator to more readily put into place Nussbaum's central capabilities. I suggest, then, that in order for communication to be fruitful, it is vital that teachers know their learners on a personal level, understand their background, and have knowledge of their past experiences. They also need to be aware of both their learners' and their own emotions, beliefs, perceptions and ways of thinking and being and how these might influence the way in which they interact with learners. In sum, teachers need to be emotionally literate and encourage their learners to improve their emotional literacy skills, to which I now turn.

Emotional Literacy

I contend that the teaching of emotional literacy as a sub-skill bifurcated from academic knowledge and development and included in the curriculum because it is required, for example, for employability, is symptomatic of a misunderstanding of how central is emotion to creating and maintaining meaningful working relationships in the classroom. Schreck (2011) suggests that emotional literacy and social skills, if they are taught, are often treated as a separate subject, and are identified as soft skills, taught as a discrete set of competencies, instead of being embedded in daily education and spontaneously developed from and in the working relationships, debates and spontaneous discussions between learners and teachers. This mechanistic view of one's own and others' emotions, I suggest, has a detrimental effect on the capacity to empathise and be compassionate towards others. I contend that empathy is a prerequisite of compassion, which Nussbaum (2001b:301) describes as 'a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune'. Before judging someone, a person needs to understand the other's experiences, challenges, thought processes, and emotions and to a certain extent connect with some of her/his pain. Without genuine compassion over time, the teacher is trying to nurture personal interaction, empathy and compassion on barren ground. The relationship between learner and teacher may then become strained, one not listening to the other, making a relationship of trust more difficult to develop.

Additionally, in Bentham's pedagogical model as discussed in Chapter Three, the teacher plays the role of a facilitator delivering a subject rather than an educator developing emotional awareness, critical analysis, creativity and divergent thinking. Bentham (1816) argues that emotions, particularly negative emotions, are centred in the self. This, according to Sandel (2010), is dangerous for society because if human nature is naturally selfish, then a

person will act in her/his own self-interest, rather than the interest of the majority and thus society will suffer at the hands of individual greed. This approach separates emotion from rationality, implying that individual human emotions are merely animal energies or primal impulses wholly separate from human cognition, which interfere with rationality so should be largely ignored.

Conversely, the Capabilities Approach, according to Nussbaum (2010), rejects the utilitarian notion that the human being is a selfish maximizer of her/his own interests. According to Nussbaum (2001b), the utilitarian pedagogical model does not fit real life. On the one hand, passions are strong and, on the other hand, human beings have a moral sense and so a capability for both imaginative and altruistic behaviour. This capability is borne from the capacity to feel the emotions of empathy and compassion, and developed through imagining the pain, suffering and experiences of another - in other words, putting oneself in another's shoes. Nussbaum (2001b) argues that a truly human life is attained through human relationships and social contributions, a concept that is ignored in the utilitarian pedagogical model. Kant (1785) also acknowledges that freedom flourishes not only when a person acts in an inter-dependent way, but when s/he is both autonomous and contributes to the implementation of social goals.

Additionally, Mill (1861) argues that it is the inner feeling that an educated person experiences that enables her/him to recognize her/his social being and the importance of altruism. This emphasizes the importance of education instilling the feeling of being connected to fellow human beings. This important function of education occurs with the autistic learners on the Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) curriculum day trips as discussed in earlier chapters when learners find themselves and each other as a group in an

unfamiliar environment. Upon returning to the college after these trips the learners and teachers have evidently created more social bonds with each other. If we take this as a microcosm of society, it could be argued that what, in part, shapes a society is the importance and nature of the bonds between people and that human progress is rooted in the strengthening of social bonds and the care for others' interests. More than this, the challenge helps people discover that looking out for the good of others is a source of personal flourishing and happiness. A teacher's own flourishing is therefore bound up with that of their learners as s/he shares past life and current educational experiences and grow together. Virtue becomes desirable when it is understood as the development of individual intellectual and moral abilities and linked with the search for the common good.

Furthermore, Nussbaum, in *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (2018) observes that, because as all human beings are vulnerable and mortal, these aspects of human nature should not be feared and dreaded but addressed with reciprocity and mutual support. Moreover, Nussbaum (2002) makes a case for the importance of cultivating a rich inner life by celebrating emotion and embracing vulnerability. She argues that, instead of fearing them, we should view feelings as a generative force.

> Do not despise your inner world…our society is very outward-looking…as we grow, we all develop a wide range of emotions … Our emotional life maps our incompleteness: A creature without any needs would never have reasons for fear, or grief, or hope, or anger. (Nussbaum, 2002:176)

Moreover, Nussbaum (2002) suggests that our emotional life maps our incompleteness for a being without any needs would never have reasons for emotions. So, we should not be ashamed either of our emotions or our vulnerability and needs which are often bound up with our emotions. Friendship, such as that between a teacher and her/his learners, can provide both with the strength and freedom to approach the adventure of life. If we only listen to the

external world and how we feel we are perceived by it, any anxieties or insecurities from our inner world may haunt us, and we may feel a yearning that may not be satisfied. Therefore, to be whole, we need to embrace the vulnerable complexities of being human rather than feel ashamed of them.

The feeling of shame as discussed in Chapter Four, that is a shame that has been shaped by the harsh judgement of societal norms and the requirement to conform to those, is, Nussbaum (2010) argues, what makes people flee from their inner world of feeling, failing to confront and overcome their own emotional experiences. Additionally, this urge to avoid acknowledging our inner feelings forces us to live in a culture that directs us to think externally and to measure ourselves against external factors, such as how we appear to other people. This is evident on social media where people often present what they feel is a perfect or improved version of themselves but which does not really exist. I argue that education can and should counter-balance this, by promoting empathy and compassion towards others. Nussbaum (2006a:157) argues that 'education can do a great deal' to make emotional connections between people 'deeper, more pervasive, and more even-handed'. This may be especially the case if one takes, as does Nussbaum (2006a), the view that rational and moral personhood is something all human beings share, shaped in many different ways, thereby embracing the concept that there are many different ways of thinking and being. If viewed in this way, education not only contributes to a learner's flourishing by providing knowledge but can also affirm a person's being and the unique contribution s/he can make, both in the classroom and in wider society, when her/his way of communicating is understood and embraced by others. This, I argue may be accomplished through positive working relationships in the classroom and the teacher really getting to know her/his learner.

Furthermore, Nussbaum (2002) contends that the antidote to ill-thinking about oneself is a

> … kind of self-love that does not shrink from the needy and incomplete parts of the self, but accepts those parts with interest and curiosity … (Nussbaum, 2002:176-7)

and attempts to develop a colloquy that validates needs and feelings. I suggest that this can be achieved through learner-teacher relationships. Moreover, Nussbaum argues that storytelling, especially the sharing of our own stories, such as the teacher sharing with the learner and vice versa, helps a person to imagine what another person may feel in response to events. Simultaneously, we can identify with the other and learn something about ourselves. Understanding the complexities of our emotions and our inter-relationships with others through stories and experiences gives us, Nussbaum (2002:177) claims, a 'richer and more subtle grasp of human emotions and of our own inner world'. This may in turn create an enriched life with the self and enhanced possibilities of real communication with others. It is this communication that is so precious to the high-functioning autistic learners at the College, as it not only makes them feel valued but helps them to develop trust and navigate the world around them. By having working relationships that afford the sharing of emotions and personal life stories, learners can develop an understanding of others, and they may come to understand that they are not alone in their thoughts and experiences. They may feel that another 'gets' them or that they themselves can be in a position to help someone else. This exchange of emotions and experiences in turn, may encourage relationships of trust, which may also nurture confidence and self-esteem, leading to each other's flourishing and it is to the concept of Aristotle's human flourishing or *eudaimonia* that Nussbaum embraces and to which I now turn.

Human Flourishing and *Eudaimonia*

Nussbaum (2006a) understands the ancient Greek concept of *eudaimonia* or human flourishing as a multifarious and diverse form of human activity with a range of different elements not reducible to facets of each other, each being important. Importantly, on her account, human flourishing does not just consist of a feeling of satisfaction or happiness. Rather, she maintains that it is a total form of activity (2006a:74) which includes all the major human functions that, in a sense, constitute a complete life for a human being, which are addressed in her list of ten central capabilities. Nussbaum largely follows Aristotle in her definition of human flourishing. She argues (2006a) that Aristotle suggests that each human life has a purpose and that the function of one's life is to attain that purpose. This purpose is earthly happiness, flourishing or well-being, that can be achieved via reason and the acquisition of virtue. Moreover, all human beings should use their abilities to their fullest potential to obtain happiness through the exercise and development of their capacities on a journey of learning. However, and as noted above, the concept of *eudaimonia* is not merely being in a happy state but is the continuous development of the whole human being whose journey of self-realization finishes only at death and is a life freely chosen. Hence Nussbaum (2006a) contends that *eudaimonia* is the realization of intellectual and moral virtues, and the fulfilment of specific human physical and mental capabilities, which may be different for each individual. She follows Aristotle in the view that human beings have a natural desire and capacity to know and understand the truth, to pursue moral excellence and to instantiate their ideals in the world through action. Human interactions with each other, such as those described earlier in this chapter amongst learners, their teachers and their peers, can form part of this learning process because they can provide opportunities for everyone involved to develop their learning, knowledge, and moral capacity and to advance their search for the

truth by learning from each other. This implies that one's own flourishing is bound up with another's and, having alluded to this already, it is to this interrelationship that I now turn.

One key difference between Nussbaum and Aristotle is that Nussbaum (2006a:182) advocates the idea of 'a space for diverse possibilities of flourishing' instead of a single idea of flourishing. In this way, neurological difference or neurodiversity, as it is termed by Singer (1995) and as was discussed in the introduction of this Dissertation, may be recognised as part of the uniqueness of an individual who is to be not simply treated with respect and dignity, but celebrated. The Capabilities Approach also respects people's choices in their own lives and values their own perceptions of what they consider to be flourishing for themselves, recognising that we are all unique in the way that we think about and have desires related to our own lives.

Moreover, the Capabilities Approach focuses on the multidimensionality and plurality that characterises a particular person and their human dignity, that is, it recognises that there are many elements to one person, for example, their intellect, sexuality, culture, personality and personal perspective. It also recognises the transient and changing nature of a person's life as s/he develops. The recognition of the transience of human nature and need is reflected in current research on autism. Guldberg (2020:26-27) argues that 'The same high-functioning autistic person may have different needs, at different times, in different contexts' and so it must be understood that 'both the individual and their development is dynamic'. This transience is a characteristic of the journey of self-realisation for everyone and is marked by interactions with others. By including a wide range of interpretations or dimensions in the conceptualization of well-being and well-being outcomes, the Capabilities Approach broadens the informational basis of assessment of need for an individual or group and allows

for needs and desires to evolve over time. Moreover, Terzi (2020:6), using the Capabilities Approach in her important contribution to education and disability (and see Terzi, 2005), argues that in developing essential capabilities, which I suggest may include the capability to critically think and make informed choices, the role of education 'is inherently linked to the achievement of well-being [*eudaimonia*] and the possibility of leading good lives'. The Capabilities Approach then, is an appropriate approach to take to support high-functioning autistic learners because it is premised on and allows that education is not only about academic achievement and employability, but at its core is the development of every aspect of the person including the person as a social and emotional being, that is education is about flourishing or *eudaimonia* and it is to this that I now turn.

Emotions, education and *eudaimonia*

Nussbaum (2013) claims that the emotions are a central part of the concept of *eudaimonia*, stating that emotions are *eudaimonistic*, that is, concerned with the person's flourishing. She argues that emotions

> … appraise the world from the person's own viewpoint, therefore, of that person's evolving conception of a worthwhile life. (Nussbaum, 2013:11)

Moreover, she suggests that *eudaimonia* is related to mutual relations and acts of personal and civic love and friendship in which the person is loved and benefitted for his or her own sake. These acts of love and friendship are based on empathy and compassion, including the emotional ability to place oneself in another's shoes. Thinking of how another may feel emotionally can improve a person's capacity to love and show compassion and these actions may form part of the elements of a subject's own life. In this way, Nussbaum (2001b:32-33) argues that emotions 'embody the person's own commitment to the object [that is the other person] as a part of her [own] scheme of ends'. Here, Nussbaum follows Aristotle's argument

that the highest love mainly involves the desire for one's own good, and that the natural and proper aim of life is to fulfil human potential. This is rather like a second self, in that our own flourishing is influenced by another's flourishing: by caring for the life of another I care for my own life. This idea mainly emerges in Aristotle's discussion of *philia* which, he claims, is the highest form of love.

Philia

Aristotle identifies two main kinds of *philia*, the first of which is self-love. He suggests that friendships and relationships with others improve one's self-esteem because they provide the opportunity to act in ways that express what is best in oneself, to be true to ourselves. This is because loving others inspires the energy and tenacity to dedicate oneself to one's own flourishing. An instance of this occurred when an autistic learner came to see me in a distressed state. She had been making a birthday card for her mother, with whom she had lived by herself since she was a small child as most of her family had died. The learner told me that, as she was making the card, she suddenly realised what sacrifices her mother had made for her. This realisation made her feel emotionally overwhelmed and upset. Another learner, who also happened to be her classmate and often got the bus home with her, enquired after her welfare. This learner was also on the autistic spectrum and had difficulties with impulsive behaviour and regulating his emotions, as a result of which he would cheat, scream and walk out if he was losing a game in class. This appeared to be, in part, because his self-image and self-esteem were dependent on others thinking him a skilled and accomplished winner, so whenever he lost his self-esteem would plummet, resulting in extreme reactions. He also found it difficult to take turns or share with others.

Instead of employing punitive measures to address his perceived behavioural difficulties, I set him a challenge in order to help him feel responsible with an important role to play within the community of the College. Having asked the learner who was upset's permission, I asked the other learner to take care of his friend and explained how and why she was in distress. They both usually accompanied each other home on the bus, being best friends so I asked him to accompany her home on the bus. I advised the learner that he could use the bus ride home as an opportunity to listen to her if she wanted to talk without interruption, to comfort her and to help her to find a way to talk to her mother. Accepting the task, he spoke to the learner concerned and listened patiently to her worries. He then empathized with her, telling her about his own grandfather's recent death and, gathering her belongings, went off to the bus stop. The next morning, both learners returned with smiles on their faces. The young woman said that, because her friend had listened to her, together they had come up with a way for her to talk to her mother without getting upset and she felt confident to do this when returning home. This had resulted in a very positive conversation with her mother, raising her self-esteem and her confidence in managing emotionally-loaded conversations. The other learner told me that it had made him feel good to help his friend. After they had got off the bus, he had bought her sweets to make her feel better, and he said that showing empathy and compassion had made him feel like a good person. He had been given the opportunity to make a choice as to whether to help his friend or not and, by helping her, he felt he had freely made the right decision. Most importantly, by trusting this learner, I had confirmed his value as a person. His behaviour throughout that day at college was impeccable, and it was evident to him that his own flourishing was intertwined with that of his friend[2].

[2] Although anonymity has been kept, the learners have signed a permission slip (see appendix A) that this example may be used.

It is frequently suggested that people typically seek approval and reward from others. According to Aldridge *et al*. (2009), studies indicate that individuals exert effort to obtain social rewards including taking pleasure in mutual co-operation or helping others as did the learner in the example above. Moreover, Brodkin *et al*. (2012:232) suggest that these types of social interactions have 'intrinsic value' because people find them inherently rewarding. The fact that a person may take pleasure from social rewards may mean that teachers who build positive and nurturing relationships with learners may also benefit and reap personal rewards from those relationships. The teacher helps the learner with the various dilemmas and transactions of daily life and, over time, helps a move towards independence and there may also be a reward for the teacher in developing this professional friendship, learning from the learner and knowing that they have contributed to another's flourishing.

A second type of *philia* for Aristotle is self-knowledge. Socrates, Aristotle's teacher, claimed, as quoted by Aristotle in *Apology,* that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. In order to really know oneself, a person needs to think deeply about her/his values and motivations. Furthermore, and according to Hudson (1981), Aristotle considers one type of self-knowledge, namely knowing our motives for our actions, particularly central to flourishing. His main argument is that our motives are not arbitrary whims but, rather, they embody our intrinsic conceptions of what is good and they express our values. In order to comprehend what sort of life we are leading as human beings we need to examine the motives that drive our actions and ask if we have chosen the right actions from the right motives. Only by understanding what values drive us, can we be certain that our actions are true to those and so know who we are. In the example of the two friends above, the male learner understood that his motives of empathising and showing compassion towards his friend were bound up with his care and love for his friend and her emotional welfare. By caring for her and seeing that

she felt better and was flourishing, he in turn felt good about himself; he felt needed and that he had done the right thing morally. In this way, he himself was flourishing.

Moreover, by relating his own emotional suffering over his grandfather's death, it was as if he saw himself mirrored in his friend's suffering. In this way, his friend could be viewed as a second self. In *Eudemian Ethics,* Aristotle (EE 1245a35-7) argues that we learn about ourselves from a loved one, not so much because of what s/he tells us but because, by observing our own reflection in the other, we gain insight to who we are ourselves, rather like looking into a mirror, helping each other to improve as people. Aristotle argues that by discovering that our intuitions of kinship with the other are reliable, trustworthy, well-intentioned and well-founded, we can discover our own nature and the reasons why we make the choices and act in the way we do. Aristotle offers us this crucial insight: the notion of who we are is formed through intimate, sustained relations with others, based on a sense of deep affinity which has stood the test of time. This is evidence that each individual is indeed a social creature as in the example here and it also points to individuality as fundamentally relational.

Thus teachers, rather than using punitive measures, may benefit from firstly finding out what intrinsic motivations may cause perceived disruptive behaviour and then, rather than punishing the learner, they might provide opportunities not only for the development of self-knowledge and awareness, but also to develop empathy and care towards others. This does not, of course, imply that teachers should refrain from establishing and maintaining professional boundaries or from informing a learner when certain, perhaps dangerous or violent, behaviours are unacceptable. It does imply that teachers might provide opportunities for the nurturing of empathetic and compassionate relationships with others over time and

this will require striking a careful balance of guidance and care and the nurturing of independence for flourishing.

Similarly, the relationships teachers have with their learners may help develop the self-knowledge of both. Indeed, I constantly learn about myself and my values from my relationships with colleagues and the learners with whom I work. For example, by observing the patience and understanding of one specialist teacher towards his learners, I reappraised my own attitude towards the learners. In one situation that arose, rather than taking an authoritarian approach, I tried the opposite approach of providing an opportunity for the learner to choose positive behaviour. When I saw the learner's positive reaction and how he responded to me, thanking me and telling me I was a great teacher, I knew that I had made the right choice. I felt good about both myself as a teacher and a person for creating this opportunity for the learner, and my self-esteem was raised. However, I felt that admitting this took courage. I am an experienced teacher and I should have known better - at least this is how I have been trained to think, as if a professional should know everything involved in her/his profession. Even though I mentor newly-qualified teachers and tell them teaching is a learning journey that lasts a lifetime, I am still conditioned, even after years of teaching experience and training, to think I should always have the right answers and solutions. Furthermore, in my position as Head of Additional Learning Support and Inclusion and as the eldest of five siblings, the role I have constantly found myself playing in life is as a nurturer. It is only now, as I write this Dissertation, that I realise that in order to be a nurturer, I must embrace my own vulnerabilities and needs and fallibilities. It is this vulnerability that I share with my colleagues and learners that enables me to appraise myself and develop the empathy and compassion needed for the flourishing of both myself and those with whom I interact. Teachers and learners are constantly interacting with each other to relate to and understand

both each other, so the discussion of any subject can have a deep meaning rather than being mechanistic and superficial. This interactive relationship, I believe, embraces the particular type of love known as agape.

Agape in education

For Nussbaum, the search for liberal justice, the acceptance of marginalised individuals as equal, both in terms of citizenship and in terms of rights and entitlements, is sustained by love. This includes, of course, autistic learners. Nussbaum argues that love sustains justice, both instrumentally and intrinsically. The love that matters for Nussbaum (2013) is a particularistic love, in the context of this study, the love between a teacher and a learner which, I suggest encompasses the concept of *agape*. In *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (2013:15), she argues that 'all of the core emotions that sustain a decent society have their roots or are forms of love'. The justice sustaining emotions will either be manifestations of particularistic love or they will be rooted in particularistic love in the sense that social justice and inclusion grow from them and are enthused, constrained or regulated by them. Without this link back to particularistic love, emotions and affective responses lack meaning and cogency. Love, then, is not simply a causal means of bringing about an independently specified goal, specifically the inclusion of an individual in the classroom. It runs deeper than this and is also about bringing out certain kinds of emotions that underpin behaviour, or that characterise desired outcomes, for example, sacrificing one's own desires to enable the flourishing of another, the core of the concept of *agape*.

Compassion-based love or *agape* may be a long-term goal in itself and can be intrinsically motivated within us through the feeling that, by helping another, we ourselves have value, autonomy and purpose. With this in mind, I would argue that the concept of *agape* embraces

the successful functional, communal, critical and inspirational in the classroom. *Agape* is functional because, through a working relationship in which each individual is respected and valued for her/his unique contribution, learners and teachers can work together to achieve successful and innovative solutions to problems and advancements in thinking that might even ultimately benefit wider society. By teaching all learners and teachers ways in which they can communicate effectively in the classroom, for example, effective listening skills, the high-functioning autistic learner, who is often seen as different, may be embraced by the classroom community and participate in it as an asset rather than as someone with a deficit s/he needs to overcome.

Furthermore, *agape* is communal in that political and societal culture depends on love and an extension of sympathy. Through working relationships founded on empathy and compassion, the wider communities in which the individual lives may also benefit. By incorporating the daily lives of the learners and their teachers into the classroom colloquy, for example when discussing educational objectives and activities, all learners may simultaneously explore their cultural identity as contributors to their respective communities. Gustein (2006) argues that promoting community knowledge means acknowledging the complexity of different perspectives and interpretations of the world. By discovering the different perspectives of individuals, learners may expand their own perspectives and be more tolerant and respectful of others.

Additionally, by having experienced feeling valued for her/his divergent thinking and creativity in the classroom community, a learner's confidence and self-esteem may be raised so that later, after leaving college, s/he may develop the capabilities and courage to contribute autonomously to her/his community. For example, a high-functioning autistic learner who

had a very good working relationship with his teacher and classmates, contacted that teacher a number of years after graduation. The learner told the teacher that because he had felt valued for the contribution that he could make to his class, he had the desire, confidence and resilience needed to do something to help his local community. The learner invented a device that would help senior citizens to maintain effective communication with the outside world. Thus, a relationship based on *agape* in the classroom had a wider, ripple effect on a vulnerable group in the learner's local community, enabling that learner to go out into the world without fear regarding inequity and the problems of the world, and confident that changes could be made, and that he was equipped to make them with a vision of a better world. In such ways tolerance, inclusion and flourishing are realized through *agape* but, of course, trust is critical.

Nurturing Trust

Nussbaum (2011) argues that moral life is based upon the capacity to trust. She claims that when a person has negative life experiences the capacity to trust may be lost. This is evident when talking to many of the high-functioning autistic learners I support. Their past negative experiences, which may include bullying or being taken advantage of, together with difficulty comprehending social signals, can mean that they find it difficult to know when to trust someone. Anecdotally, autistic blogger Astrangeringodzone (2012), explained that her issues with trust originated from being naïve, open and trusting as a younger person, taking people and situations at face value. Being willing to believe whatever people said, it never occurred to her that other people might deceive, trick, manipulate or abuse her or others. As a consequence of similar naivety, many high-functioning autistic people have been or are at risk of being maltreated and betrayed repeatedly, often by non-high-functioning autistic people. At some point, they may come to view all other people as suspicious and may

become resentful. They may also become so sensitive that they jump to erroneous conclusions and, for example, see as negative words and actions not so intended.

To bring about a change and nurture trust, one has to alter one's perspective and to do that one has to have some rational insight. For Nussbaum (2001b), a belief is tied to specific content but an emotion is characterised by the way the world is represented in thought and by the way the content of that thought is associated with other thoughts. For example, if two high-functioning autistic learners who are friends have a disagreement because of a misunderstanding and are refusing to co-operate with each other, the support teacher may act as an intermediary between the two learners. When playing such a role, by offering empathy and compassion and showing that each learner is valued then thought processes may be altered and, upon reflection, the two learners may once again become friends. In this way the teacher has helped the learners to navigate a problem, both socially and emotionally. However, I suggest that for any learner to be influenced by the teacher, trust which is tied to all sorts of emotions must be present because an emotional interaction between people will be subjective and this, I believe, is the core of trust.

Lahno (2001) describes two central features of trust. The first involves the participant's emotional attitude towards the person being trusted, the second is that a situation of trust is perceived by a trusting person as one in which shared values and norms motivate both their own actions and those of the person being trusted. Accordingly, as an emotional attitude trust is, to a certain extent, independent of objective reality and determines what the trusting person will believe and how s/he will predict and evaluate outcomes. While trust always entails risk and 'systematic vulnerability' (Flores and Solomon 1998:220), it can also enable people to cope with risk and possible danger and may provide new opportunities and benefits.

Jones (1996) argues that trust is about the good will and confidence a person has in the competence of another. However, to trust, we must relinquish some control to the other person and do that we have to make ourselves vulnerable. The trusting person is vulnerable because s/he allows the trustee to exercise control over important things, leaving her/him exposed to possible harm.

Furthermore, Baier (1986) argues that by trusting someone we intentionally accept being vulnerable and have faith that the person trusted will not conspire against or manipulate us. When a person depends on the good will of another, s/he is, of course, vulnerable to the limits of that good will. High-functioning autistic learners, especially if they have had negative experiences in the past and have a pattern of attracting untrustworthy people, may find it difficult to know who to trust. To gain trust, teachers need to be open to discussion of vulnerability and, perhaps and within professional boundaries, to show their learners their own vulnerability. This would help to demonstrate that, as discussed in Chapter Two, that vulnerability is not a weakness but is a usual part of the human condition of all. However, being open to such vulnerability requires courage. As trust develops over time it may transform into a more equal relationship, but not a contractarian one because it has at its core non-reciprocity. According to Kittay (2019), in the parental-child relationship, the child has no concept of a virtual contract when s/he trusts, and the parent's duty to the child appears to be in no way dependent upon the expectation that the child will reciprocate later. The teacher-learner relationship of trust may mirror this if is a filial not a contractual relationship resting on deals actual or implicit between teacher and learner.

To have a successful trusting relationship the teacher must trust in the responsiveness of the learner and the learner must trust in the teacher's capability to develop their thinking

favourably, if assisted in doing so by the learner themselves in suitable ways. There must be mutual trust, requiring the teacher to have a compassionate attitude towards the learner and a willingness to try to understand the learner's perspective and help them surmount any negative past experiences which may influence present views and reactions. Trust, of course, sits well in the Capabilities Approach requiring, as it does, that we treat each other with respect and dignity. The experience of being acknowledged as a person by others is of extreme importance for the development of personal identity and self-esteem. As Nussbaum (2006a) argues, because we see our fellow human beings as persons whose well-being and flourishing are intertwined with our own, we judge the others' actions not only by how effectively they pursue their goals but by the very goals they set for themselves. Thus the trustee and the trustor will need, to a certain extent, to have understood and accepted, if not entirely shared, values and common goals. There are no pre-set goals and beliefs on the side of the trustor, except perhaps, in the case of the teacher-learner relationship, the belief that the trustee has potential and that to trust her/him will have a positive outcome. For example, a teacher may trust a learner who often acts impulsively with a responsibility because of the impact of a signal of trust on the learner's attitude and behaviour. The learner may be motivated by the teacher's trust to do what is morally right. However, one thing that may destroy a trusting relationship is the combination of an unforgiving attitude on the part of the person needing to bestow trust and an over-sensitivity on the part of the person needing to be trusted.

As already noted, high-functioning autistic learners often have very low self-esteem and difficulties with trust, and so this is an area that may be particularly delicate and challenging, especially as processing difficulties may complicate matters. The teacher then needs to understand that criticism from the learner, including any projected blame, may be the result

of fear and the learner's vulnerability. Jones (1996:4) sees trust as an 'optimism about the goodwill and competence of another'. Distrust then can be a fear of being optimistic about trusting another, thinking of past failures, a kind of negative coping mechanism. The high-functioning autistic learner may be defensive from the outset, being pessimistic and wary about trust. Alternatively, high-functioning autistic learners and learners with other learning differences in my experience often run headlong into friendships without taking the time to really get to know a person. They have an ideal of who that person is. When the other person falls off the pedestal by being him/herself, the learner feels let down. Patience and understanding are thus needed on the part of the teacher. To trust someone, therefore, is to work hard intentionally and to take care of someone overtly. Trust appears to grow spontaneously, slowly, and imperceptibly, usually without deliberate intention, which is, in part, why it is so fragile. It is this fragility of human emotion that Nussbaum (2001b) argues needs to be carefully nurtured if people are to flourish. In this way, the teacher may become the merciful reader of a novel of another's life that Nussbaum refers to in *Upheavals of Thought*: *The Intelligence of Emotions* and may come to understand the learner's life as a complex story of human endeavour in a world full of hurdles to overcome with the teacher helping the learner to navigate life and overcome barriers to developing the learner's thought and emotion within the learner's own context.

If, as educators, we are to promote trusting interaction and trusting relationships between teachers and learners and their peers, I suggest we must structure our institutions in ways that allow individuals to experience their interests and values as shared, thereby contributing to the development of trusting attitudes. However, there is a dichotomy at the heart of the current neoliberal English education system, as discussed in Chapter Three, because its funding, accountability and results driven infrastructure is not conducive to the development

of relationships of trust between learners and teachers. This, I argue is because learners and teachers from the same and different institutions are pitted against each other in competition via standardised comparisons. To a certain extent, relationships of trust develop despite the system instead of because of it. Enslin and Hedge (2008), suggest that Higher Education is now defined and determined as a saleable product rather than as a public good with a fundamentally social and moral purpose, valued for its intrinsic worth alongside its benefits to society and the economy. I argue that this applies equally to the whole education system. Furthermore, Enslin and Hedge (2008) also suggest that, in today's neoliberal climate, what cannot be readily measured cannot be valued. This is evident in my own professional context in the measurable outcomes of learners' local authority Education Health and Care plans. Next to the list of outcomes is a column for each outcome that asks the question 'how will this be measured'? The working relationships of trust which I contend are so important cannot be measured objectively or numerically. They are intrinsic, abstract and subjective and yet, over time, they have been recorded as valuable and so I argue that they should be both recognized and encouraged.

Educators surely need to develop the capabilities of each learner in a learning environment that nurtures love and trust. Nussbaum (2018) claims that love that is more than narcissistic need requires the capacity to think about the other person as a separate person, to imagine what that the other person feels and wants, and to allow that person to evolve and flourish. In other words, love requires empathy and compassion. When we work from a standpoint of compassion, we are turned outward. We think of what is happening to others and what is causing it. We stand back from ourselves and our own feelings and thoughts about others. For example, by putting his learners before his own concerns, anxieties and fears, the specialist teacher mentioned earlier gained an insight into the development and flourishing of the

learner, not only freeing and empowering him but also himself. He does this because by showing empathy and compassion, he reduces fear both within the learner and himself.

Of course, fear may always be present, but the educator's skill lies in empowering the learner by providing learning opportunities and life experiences that maintain the feelings of courage and determination that may be found within fear and anger and transforming those feelings into self-confidence and care for the self and others. When teachers act with genuine empathy and compassion rather than mechanistic or tokenistic care and when they take a genuine interest in the welfare and care of their learners, security and confidence between teacher and learners and their peers begin to be reciprocated, albeit taking different forms. This is evident in my context the weekly enrichment classes, in which learners show care and support for each other. If one learner has a presentation to make, the other learners show their support, encouraged by the teacher. Learners and teachers celebrate each other's achievements, share in each other's anxieties and sadness and provide advice for each other if they have a problem or when a person is in emotional distress. In this way, personal and group moral strength can evolve and self-confidence can improve. According to Beck and Emery (1985), an individual's positive appraisal of what s/he is and has to offer as a unique individual, and how s/he overcomes and deals with problems and threats, can become second nature, and enhance a sense of self-efficacy and strength.

In sum, I have argued in this chapter that it is important to acknowledge and understand emotions, perceptions and vulnerabilities as key elements of human dignity. Through nurturing empathy and compassion in relationships of trust, based on *philia* and *agape*, then a combination of idiosyncratic love, the cultivation of a critical spirit, and the adoption of non-coercive educational measures may be established and so reduce fear and anxiety.

Furthermore, this manifestation of love would be polymorphous because it would reflect the different personalities, histories, contexts and problems of individuals. I have also suggested that care needs to be taken with working relationships between the teacher and the high-functioning autistic learners in focus in this study. Boundaries need to be established and maintained because, if an individual finds boundaries difficult to understand and accept, as do some high-functioning autistic learners, then tactful and careful guidance will be required. For example, if a learner in an attempt to be humorous takes a joke too far and causes offence, careful guidance highlighting the reasons why an individual's actions may be viewed by others as offensive needs to occur. I have suggested that this should not be in the form of authoritarian punitive measures, especially if there clearly is no hurtful intention. Rather the approach should be focused on helping the learner to become aware of and to navigate social norms. S/he will need support to understand how others' feelings may be affected by her/his actions in ways that way feelings of guilt, low self-worth and anxiety can be alleviated. The teacher, then has the role of a friend but also needs to act as a role model and guide by setting and explaining limits, giving effective clear instructions and checking these are understood, being consistent and offering choices as a high-functioning autistic learner will need guidance to navigate and judge the world effectively. By setting limits and giving effective instructions accompanied by explanations, rather than ambiguous requests and, by explaining to learners what is required rather than what is not required of them, learners can become clear about what needs to be done and how and why. Furthermore, offering choices and multiple outcomes helps learners learn and to make decisions and think for themselves. In turn this can improve the flexibility of their thinking and their capacity to self-navigate the environment and society and so raise their self-esteem with, of course, compassion, praise and encouragement required when providing such guidance.

As demonstrated in Chapter Two and in this chapter, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach is not based on a 'one size fits all' premise. There is no standardisation regarding personhood and individual flourishing beyond the underlying premises of affording respect and dignity for all and the maxim that persons should be treated as end in themselves and not means to the ends of others. Applying this approach to education will necessitate a move away from the Benthamite, standardised factory-style concept of education discussed in Chapter Three. That approach, played out today in the neoliberal education agenda, is suited to only one type of thinker. By contrast the Capabilities Approach would enable a shift to a more intuitive, creative, flexible, and diverse model of education based on the flourishing of the individual in every aspect of their life. A practical application of the Capabilities Approach used in my own professional setting and reflecting these values and underpinning premises is Positive Niche Construction (PNC) and I will now discuss this in Chapter Six.

Chapter Six: Implementing the Capabilities Approach in the Classroom Through Positive Niche Construction and Classroom Discussion.

> Twenty-first century learning requires critical thinking, collaboration, and creativity – precisely the strengths many individuals with learning disabilities possess.
>
> *Neurodiversity in the Classroom*, Thomas Armstrong (2012:46).

High-functioning autistic learners, and learners with Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and other Specific Learning Differences (SpLDs), are often excellent at divergent thinking, a pre-requisite for creative thinking as suggested by Armstrong (2012) in the epigraph above. In our post-industrial society politicians such as Boris Johnson have referred to the requirement and importance of creative thinking and creative thinkers for the work force and for global development in all areas of life. However, I have suggested, with many others, that the current functionalist standardised notion of education, outlined in Chapter Three particularly, can all too easily stifle alternative and creative thinking. It is a paradox that politicians pronounce society's need for divergent thinkers while maintaining an education system that discriminates against such individuals. In this Dissertation it is my contention that education systems such as those in place in England result, often, in the classroom as an environment replete with tension and in which the importance of emotion is ignored. All learners currently defined as having SEND in full could be redefined as alternative thinkers. This does not mean dismissing any difficulties individuals may face, but it is a re-evaluation of the way in which society, including professionals in the education system, view people with hidden learning differences.

If such a shift were to occur then the insights and perceptions of high-functioning autistic learners might be properly appreciated in an education system no longer intent on fitting them into a designated place at the tail end of a factory production line whilst paying lip

service to equality and inclusion. Instead, that system would seek out and value the alternative and often innovative ideas of high-functioning autistic learners as divergent thinkers and do so, in keeping with Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach in ways that afforded them dignity and respect. In this chapter, I will suggest that Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach can be practically applied in the classroom through the concept of Positive Niche Construction (PNC) and democratic classroom discussion and I will use examples employed in my own teaching context. These examples have been employed to support high-functioning autistic learners and learners with SEND in the College in which I work. Their success has been evidenced by numerical data, empirical observations and positive feedback from learners, parents and guardians, staff at the college, and external agencies, including local authority psychological service staff and universities. Initially, I will show how Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach fits well with Armstrong's (2012) model of PNC and will include a description of its tenets. I will then outline the importance of democratic dialogue in the classroom and how this and the tenets of PNC are fundamental to developing the effective empathetic and compassionate relationships of trust advocated in Chapter Five.

Nussbaum's Ten Central Capabilities and Positive Niche Construction (PNC)

Nussbaum (2006a) argues that every human being has a core set of human entitlements whatever their social situation. The central capabilities discussed in Chapter Two and referred to throughout this Dissertation are predicated upon a type of political framework that Nussbaum (2006a:70) states makes them 'specifically political goals and presents them in a manner free of any specific metaphysical grounding'. It fits in with the person being a political being. Because this may be applied to suit the needs and context of an individual, the capabilities may also be used to find common ground amongst people within a society that may have 'very different comprehensive conceptions of the good' (Nussbaum, 2006a:70).

This supports my claim that individual difference and diversity should be recognized in order for individual strengths and needs to be identified and addressed in a positive and equitable way. As I demonstrated in Chapter Four, autism is a very individualised condition for which I contend that this approach is appropriate. Furthermore, Nussbaum (2010) argues that an educational model that is based upon the values of the Capabilities Approach is not just about the passive absorption of facts, cultural traditions and social norms, but is about stimulating the mind to become knowledgeable and thoughtfully critical in a complex world. Learning often benefits from collaboration, which may involve the discussion of one's own perspectives within working relationships of effective communication based upon understanding and empathy. In such ways, ideas are shared and challenged and new knowledge and understandings can be gained. The learner-teacher-peer working relationship can also be hope-inducing if learners are supported to identify their own strengths and link these with those of other people, communities or cultures. Meaningful choices can then be made as each person will be aware of their strengths and resources, and their hopes and aspirations. I suggest that it is the educational practitioner's duty to help learners with the choices they make and to support them in making informed decisions. Furthermore, this working relationship is the foundation for the development of the whole person.

A practical educational framework wherein the values of the Capabilities Approach may be applied is also necessary, and in the department in which I work, we have employed Thomas Armstrong's Positive Niche Construction (PNC). Instead of seeking to cure, alleviate, remediate or ameliorate a learner's learning difference, as in the medical model discussed in Chapter Two, PNC aims to encourage the classroom teacher to seek to discover a learner's requirements for optimal growth and then to implement the necessary strategies in the classroom. Furthermore, PNC is a practical pedagogical application that accords with the

values advocated by Nussbaum: the importance of the flourishing of the individual, each one with their own desires, needs and learning environment. This is evident as Armstrong (2012) advocates a learner-centred, identity first approach to education, which is goal-orientated and views difference as part of the individual's own dignity.

> We do not pathologize a Calla Lily by saying it has a 'petal deficit disorder'. We simply appreciate its unique beauty … Similarly, we ought not to pathologize children who have different kinds of brains and different ways of thinking and learning. (Armstrong, 2012:9)

Armstrong's model of PNC works on the principle that everyone possesses unique characteristics which may be viewed as strengths, capabilities, potential and goals, and which, when harnessed effectively, may help an individual to evolve along her/his life journey as a whole person. Additionally, McCashen (2005) argues that a strength-based approach to teaching uses positivity and encouragement to enable the learner to develop the confidence to face challenges effectively and to develop a sense of her/his own dignity, capabilities, rights, uniqueness, and their similarities to others. This means the learner is the agent of her/his own learning. By the educator actively listening to the needs and desires of the learner, understanding her/his unique ways of communicating, helping her/him to communicate with others, and providing a positive learning environment in the context of her/his individual disposition, effective systems can be set up and enhanced so that inclusiveness can be achieved. This strength-based approach consists of seven components:

1. environmental modifications
2. strength awareness
3. strength-based strategies
4. affirmative career aspirations
5. positive role models
6. enhanced human resources

7. universal design for learning and assistive technologies. (Armstrong, 2012:14)

In this chapter, I will describe how, in my own college setting, we have implemented each component and located it within the context of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, using her list of Central Capabilities as a threshold framework for enabling a life worthy of human dignity. I will also describe how, through a focus on discussion in the classroom, we focus on positive working relationships to nurture and develop the learners' capability to develop self-esteem and their critical thinking skills as well as to develop their creative ideas in collaboration with each other.

The Learning Environment

According to PNC theory, all human beings have different brains, they are all neurodivergent as discussed in the introductory chapter of this dissertation. In the field of biology, according to Armstrong (2012) the term 'niche construction' is used to describe an emerging phenomenon in the understanding of the evolution of all living organisms according to which the species acts directly upon its environment to change it in order to survive and flourish. Similarly, in the classroom, high-functioning autistic learners are to be given the tools to create their own learning environment suited to their way of thinking and that may enable them to flourish. For example, at the beginning of the year, learners help design the layout of the classroom, suggesting and creating resources that they and others can use. For instance, learners have asked for a certain type of dimmable lighting which has been installed to help with sensory sensitivity and they have designed colour-coded organizational sheets and have contributed designs to a mindfulness colouring book that the specialist teacher devised. This is empowering for the learners, as they have ownership of their environment and feel safe and confident in it. Where learners differ in preference, certain aspects of the room are allocated

to each, so every learner's choice is represented. This also helps to create a sense of community and we find that learners often wish to come to the Additional Learning Support (ALS) classroom during the day when they do not have lessons.

Additionally, because the staff and learners in the ALS department wanted to create an atmosphere of serious study but with an air of fun, it was democratically decided that a pool and air-hockey table would be the centre-piece of the classroom. Around this table, which has provided both staff and learners with many happy memories, are study desks, and around the classroom and its annexe are twenty computers. The walls are covered with photographs from learner outings, learners' work and achievement and motivational posters chosen by the learners themselves. Each teacher's desk has a glitter lamp which acts as a sensory calmer and the room next door has been fitted out as a sensory room where learners can relax if they feel overwhelmed. As noted in Chapter Three, this has proved very popular with the high-functioning autistic learners and there is often a queue at the door. Each element of the sensory room and the ALS room was created in consultation with the learners. Learners have fed-back that having a diverse and creative multi-faceted classroom has enabled them to relax and enhanced their divergent thinking and creativity, important skills in today's world of work which the learners themselves say can flow freely because they do not feel anxious. For this reason, the learning environment, chosen by the learners themselves and including visual representations of their achievements, seeks to promote autonomy and motivation, and enhance working relationships.

Strength Awareness

Another key component of PNC is strength awareness extending beyond the learner's own awareness to teachers' awareness of learners' strengths. Jacobson and Rosenthal (2003)

suggest that teachers' positive expectations can help a learner to create for themselves a life space in which they can flourish. Strength-based strategies also include a knowledge of what a learner is passionate about, including her/his interests, goals and aspirations. When high-functioning autistic learners start their learning journey at the College, they can often tell us the barriers to their learning and what their needs are, but are far less able to talk of their strengths. Although these are documented in the learners' local authority Education Health and Care (EHC) plans, discussed in Chapter Three, they are often merely generic lists that have been cut and pasted, so they are mechanistic and of little meaning or value to the learner even if the learner has read their EHC plan. By contrast, strengths, such as the capacity to systematize, think divergently and creatively, and the encouragement of special interests are the main foci for the learning and development of the learner in the PNC approach.

Of course, it remains necessary, within a data and funding driven framework, to provide some form of numerical measurement. For the ALS department, this means using the standardised Butler and Gasson (2004) Self-Image Profile. This questionnaire is used as part of a conversation between the learner and the support tutor as an element of the initial 'getting to know you' programme. Although it has to be administered within certain regulations, staff try to use it as informally and flexibly as possible, so that it fits as naturally as possible into a conversation. This forms part of the start of developing positive relationships of trust through dialogue in which self-esteem and resilience are nurtured. Brooks and Goldstein (2001) point out that studies suggest children who have capacity to overcome adversity and develop resilience have at least one adult in their lives who believes in them and sees the best in them. Hence these initial dialogues with learners are fundamental to setting the foundation for such relationships in the College. For high-functioning autistic learners, whose self-esteem is often very low, the development of resilience, confidence, and

a passion experienced through sensation and imagination, are all key to their flourishing, enabling them to not only lead a life that Nussbaum (2006a) terms as worthy of human dignity, but also to freely choose their own life pathways of self-realisation.

Strength Based Strategies

Autistic learners at the college attend a Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) enrichment class which includes debates on topical political issues, such as cultural identity, and visits to places such as the Houses of Parliament, where they are not just passively escorted on a tour but actively take part in informal debates in a conference room within the Houses of Parliament. Such debates can nurture the learner's capability to fulfil Nussbaum's (2006a:77:10a) central capability of control over one's environment, that is to 'participate effectively in political choices' that govern her/his life. Staff also undertake a learning role on these educational trips and visits are regarded as mutual learning journeys on which teacher and the learner can teach and learn from each other. Both the Capabilities Approach and PNC imply that we shift the paradigm of teaching our learners from an approach based on deficit and remediation to an approach based on the cultivation of each other's strengths. By creating a learning atmosphere such as that described above, the aim is to encourage the flourishing of learner strengths.

Additionally, teachers need to think further ahead to beyond the time the learner has at the College and so to prepare them for that time. The supportive structure of the college will no longer be present and when this occurs the learner needs to be able to judge and regulate her/hisown conduct, know how to appropriately respond to others, and be clear about the boundaries of social norms. However, this is not to suggest that some social norms are not flawed and excluding. The relationship between the teacher and the learner is pivotal for

developing skills to survive and flourish in the outside world because it enables the learner to understand and analyse their emotions and their emotional and social relationships. This is where the strength-based strategies of PNC are particularly pertinent. Armstrong (2012) states that strength-based learning strategies focus on the encouragement of positive belief and behaviour through frequent praise and encouragement, by providing learners with regular feedback. It also includes developing the capacity to take responsibility for one's own actions through self-talk skills such as the use of adapted Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) techniques. I have used such strategies including, for example, the downward arrow technique, which simulates Socratic questioning to search for evidence behind erroneous assumptions, judgements and decisions that can lead to polarized and obsessive thinking patterns.

By searching for evidence, as discussed in Chapter Four, the systematized and polarised thinker has the opportunity to logically search for evidence through a lens of distorted thinking. Socratic questioning may help the high-functioning autistic learner realise that her/his thoughts about a particular situation might have been triggered automatically and might not necessarily be accurate or valid. Nussbaum (2010:75) argues that 'logic is real, and it often governs our human relations'. She recounts how 'slurs and stereotypes' that feed into discrimination and prejudice work in this way through what she terms 'fallacious inference'. This may be applied to the capacity, in education, to determine fact from fiction through the development of techniques such as Socratic questioning through classroom discussion.

In addition to this, the Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) curriculum is designed to enhance the skills and emotional awareness developed in the CBT sessions, acknowledging and intertwining the complexities of emotions and different perspectives,

which affect behaviour. This, in turn, may help improve self-esteem, as the fear of misinterpretation in social interactions may dissipate. For example, a key part of the programme are self-defence sessions which are often held in Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) gymnasia. While MMA is often perceived as a violent sport, it is premised on mutual respect and self-discipline. According to Zehr (2016), MMA can improve social and emotional functioning as well as cognition and attention. The benefits are not just limited to physical health, but extend to social benefits with three such benefits particularly salient for high-functioning autistic learners. Firstly, many high-functioning autistic learners have an inherent need to repeat actions, often resulting in stimming in the form, for example, of rocking backwards and forwards. In MMA, repeated actions are necessary to create muscle memory, and so this behaviour is channelled. When a behaviour is so channelled, it can become more socially acceptable, and learners may then be more confident in their own bodies. Secondly, high-functioning autistic learners often find verbal cues difficult to navigate. In MMA, in order to develop appropriate responses, the capacity to read verbal and non-verbal cues from opponents is taught over time at the learner's own pace and this capacity may then become a transferrable skill in daily life. Thirdly, learners and teachers work together in MMA to collaboratively provide a sense of community and affiliation, the importance of which was discussed in Chapter Four.

An additional benefit from the MMA sessions are the talks that the athletes, some of whom are themselves high-functioning autistic, offer about their own life experiences, dispelling misconceptions of MMA as violent or as glamorising violence. From MMA experiences and the development of these skills, the learner can become more self-aware and, in time, become more able to take a step back and process social situations more accurately than hitherto. However, for the learner to be able to develop this skill effectively, s/he needs to be able to

practise it with a trusted person who strives to understand her/him and who does not criticise her/him in a negative way when things do go wrong. According to Gilham *et al*. (2006), such skills as described above have been shown to significantly reduce anxiety and promote an optimistic outlook amongst adolescents.

Furthermore, the Arts and Humanities subjects are relevant for developing strength-based strategies because, as Nussbaum (2010:96) argues, they stimulate and nurture creativity and imagination. Instruction in the Arts and Humanities, she argues, cultivates one's 'inner world of thought and feeling', including the capacity to empathise and develop compassion for others, as well as to develop cross-cultural experience and an understanding of concepts such as gender and ethnicity. For example, the use of role play in Drama and the study of poetry and prose in English may enable a high-functioning autistic learner, and indeed any learner, to develop her/his understanding of how things might appear from someone else's perspective. Thus education, as Plato tells us his teacher Socrates told him in *Apology*, is a process of revealing what the learner already knows inside them, the 'inner world' that Nussbaum refers to. I suggest that this cannot be realised through a didactic monologue, but will be more viable through an educational colloquy between the teacher and the learner and her/his peers. Every mind has capacity within it and it is the teacher's job to realize that capability, to draw that innate knowledge out.

Affirmative Career Aspirations

Affirmative career aspirations also figure in the core components of PNC and, central to Nussbaum's capabilities approach, is a knowledge of a person's own goals so that the learner may be afforded the capability to reach those goals. For many high-functioning autistic learners, future goals may be obscured by a sense of futility, limited expectations (which may

have their origins in low teacher expectations), low-self-esteem, a poor self-image and learned helplessness. Therefore, teachers should nurture learners' aspirations so that they may embark upon careers that suit their strengths and provide them with a sense of meaning and purpose in life. High-functioning autistic learners may be particularly suited to careers in the Arts, Sciences, IT, industry or other fields of work. However, as Field and Wehmeyer (2007) argue, it is important that learners receive support to develop their capacity to understand and communicate their own strengths, study goals, and intended career paths and life outcomes if they are to make informed and autonomous decisions about their future. Any difficulties that arise are discussed with learners and positive solutions are sought. Hence the capability of being able to engage in critical reflection and discussion about the planning of one's life, what Nussbaum would categorize as an element of practical reason, is a key feature of pedagogy. For example, high-functioning autistic learners have individual support sessions to discuss such matters when they feel they need to, whilst constantly being taught to value and nurture their strengths through every interaction they have with their support teacher.

Role Modelling

Armstrong (2012:15) suggests that learners are 'powerfully influenced by the adults they see in their daily lives'. Adult role models may also be particularly important for establishing and maintaining relationships of trust. The influence of a teacher in the classroom should never be underestimated, and I suggest that the behaviour and reactions of the teacher lie at the core of this influence. Moreover, the values and beliefs that the teacher holds affect her/his conversations with learners, and this is particularly the case when talking to them about their behaviour. The way that the teacher interprets behaviour often determines her/his response to it and so, as I have suggested in previous chapters, it is vital that teachers get to know their learners as individuals with particular ways of communicating. The Additional Learning

Support (ALS) teaching team at the College where I work is neurodivergent itself. One member of the team has ADHD, I have dyspraxia, and we are all from different cultural backgrounds. The specialist teacher and I are members of an Aim Higher, Higher Education (HE) Transition Disability Working Group in partnership with universities across London and Surrey. Part of the work of the group is to set up support programmes and conferences to help learners with SEND to transition successfully into Higher Education. Some learners may not have considered going to university or may feel intimidated by the prospect and this programme aims to help learners overcome any fears they may have about university. As well as providing cross-sector support for professionals supporting learners with SEND, presentations and discussions by high-functioning autistic learners who are already at university and who are successful, akin to peer role modelling, are key elements of the programme. In this context, role modelling by both staff within the college and members of the wider community can also play a key role.

Also, the SEMH curriculum includes visits from guest speakers, many of whom are at the top of their chosen profession and also have learning differences. They act as role models for the learners, modelling the effort, resilience and persistence that is required for neurodivergent people to be successful in life and study and, because of their very qualities of divergent and creative thinking, using their imagination and reason for what Nussbaum (2006a:76:4) terms as ‘works and events of one’s own choice’. In other words, to be successful in their chosen profession, they have needed to follow their own interests within that profession as in life. However, life is not smooth, arguments occur and trust can be broken. When trust is under threat then restorative conversations need to take place. The autism specialist teacher at the college is particularly skilled in doing this. For example, seeing two autistic learners who are the best of friends break up, he took time to discuss the situation with each learner on her

own terms and from her own perspective to give them the opportunity to be able to communicate effectively, to have an honest and open discussion with each other, and to be able to trust each other again. Additionally, he uses collaborative activities such as walks in the corridor or colouring-in mind mapping in support sessions, simultaneously encouraging talks with learners in restorative conversations, especially if an upsetting incident has happened in class. This enables the learner to process events and think of appropriate reactions without pressure. It resonates with Nussbaum's (2006a) seventh capability: Affiliation, that is:

> … being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings; to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another' is fulfilled. (Nussbaum, 2006a:77)

In short, empathy and compassion for others are both shown and fulfilled through teachers and staff around the learners role-modelling empathy and compassion.

Enhanced Human Resources

Enhanced human resources, another tenet of PNC, refers to the provision of a supportive human network around learners, giving them the opportunity, in particular, to develop the capabilities of emotions and affiliations. Here working relationships are, once again, central as they can provide the support to promote learners' self-esteem, emotional well-being and academic progress. Such networks may include the support teacher, classroom teacher, peers and external staff such as psychologists, counsellors, social workers and parents or guardians/carers working collaboratively around the learner's wishes and needs. Enhancing a learner's human resource network may include strengthening the learner's most life-affirming relationships; reinvigorating existing relationships and fostering new relationships that will enhance the learner's life, whilst simultaneously establishing and maintaining healthy and clear boundaries within an affirmative and supportive environment. Enhanced

human resources encompasses Nussbaum's capability of play: 'being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities' (2006a:77:9) together as teachers and learners. For example, activities such as playing a game of pool in the classroom or, when on a day trip, taking part in a laser quest or escape room game or eating out at a restaurant together are examples of enhanced human resources. Such activities not only provide opportunities for the development of verbal communication but also form emotional bonds and ties with each other as all involved undergo the same experience together.

Universal Design for Learning and Assistive Technologies

Lastly, PNC recognises the role of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to enhance learning assistive technologies. Armstrong (2012) refers to UDL as:

> … the process of removing barriers to learning for kids [learners] with disabilities in ways that also enhance everyone else's ability to learn. (Armstrong, 2012:17)

This may take the form of digital books, graphics, mind-mapping, kinaesthetic strategies, and text to speech software to name but a few. The aim of UDL is to design an educational environment to serve a diverse range of learning differences and thinking styles. At the College, we use I-pads and learners use a range of assistive technologies to access the curriculum. However, I would argue that UDL goes further than the use of assistive technology and practical academic teaching strategies. The pedagogy used seeks to value the individual as a dignified end in themselves as it provides learning opportunities and support mechanisms that nurture the individual's interests, critical thinking and autonomy. Wood (2019:38-39) suggests that UDL enables the educator to plan each aspect of educational provision including the learning environment from the outset in order to accommodate a diverse range of learners in all manner of ways. She argues that this way, all learners may be more 'naturally accommodated'.

Furthermore, some educators now see interactive technology as the main way forward in education. Increasingly, and especially in the shadow of the current COVID-19 pandemic, more and more courses at all educational levels are being offered online. However, in my view, although assistive technology is a lifeline for many learners, it should be treated as but one of many tools to enable flourishing, not as a pedagogical model in itself because, as I argued in Chapter Four, online learning can marginalize and devalue full human interaction and dialogue, to which I now turn.

The importance of dialogue

Lipman (1991) claims that discussion between people tends towards equilibrium, with each person taking it in turn to speak and then to listen. He argues that, as discussion is an exchange of thoughts and feelings, it brings people together, challenging them to use their imagination and create new meanings, which can encourage and develop human inclusiveness as one starts to understand the perspectives of others. Even though there will inevitably be differences that are sometimes irreconcilable, the act of conversation enables people to emerge from the shared experience mentally broadened and enriched. By understanding more fully the thoughts and feelings of another person, the capacity to empathize may be renewed with an appreciation of the variety of the human experience.

Furthermore, Brookfield and Preskill (2005) argue that the purposes of classroom discussion are fourfold: to gain a more critical understanding about a topic; to enhance participants' self-awareness and their capacity to self-critique; to foster an appreciation among participants for diversity of opinion that emerges when viewpoints are exchanged openly and honestly, and to act as a catalyst in helping people make informed decisions. Discussion is an opportunity for

teachers and learners to probe their own core beliefs and assumptions, to uncover any unconscious biases, and it can also promote the self-awareness so crucial if teachers and learners are to work together successfully. As discussed in Chapter Five, when a variety of diverse learners, that is learners who think differently, express themselves in a discussion, other participants are challenged to consider a diverse range of views and see the world from other perspectives. What is essential is that each person has the opportunity to contribute to the other's understanding, whether that be through speech or in a written format. However, Kingwell (1995) argues that it is important to curb any compulsion to convey our own moral vision in order that others can receive a full hearing, so sometimes a person needs to check her/his desire to express her/himself fully or at length. For high-functioning autistic learners who, for reasons explained in Chapter Four, may find this daunting and for whom self-monitoring may be challenging, the teacher needs to find ways to help her/him to develop her/his social skills so that s/he is able to express her/himself in a way that does not cause offence or silence others. This can occur, for example, either by discussing what the learner wants to say beforehand, or through role play.

Another important and related virtue for teachers and learners to develop in democratic classrooms is humility, that is, the willingness to admit that one's knowledge and experience are limited and incomplete. This will also mean acknowledging that others in the group may have something to teach us, enabling us to maintain an open mind to new ideas and perspectives. In this way, each participant, including the teacher, cares as much about the self-development of others as for themselves. For example, I frequently refer back to the photographs of people's achievements displayed on the wall in the Additional Learning Support room. These photographs show not only learner achievement but staff achievement, and a photograph of a joint teacher presentation at Kingston University currently has pride of

place among the photographs of learner successes. In this way, not only is the whole group seen as a community, but the teachers can demonstrably function as role models of resilience and courage, reinforcing positivity in the group dynamic. This commitment to others generates a spirit of goodwill and generosity but also enhances trust. Learners and teachers become more willing to take risks and speak honestly if their behaviours are likely to be seen as mutually beneficial and yet not universally successful. However, this acknowledgement of humility takes courage and conviction in one's own capacities, including, for the teacher, in her/his capacity to teach. Hence it is vital that teachers feel valued by their learners, peers, managers and by the families of their learners in preference, or at least in addition to, feeling the anxieties of accountability and disempowered by managerial impositions as is so often the case in the current neoliberal educational system I outlined in Chapter Three.

Moreover, an atmosphere of openness and honesty can also encourage engagement with material to be learned and motivate learners to study. It can instil confidence in both the learners and the teacher helping to ensure that learners are not passive recipients of knowledge imparted by the teacher but that all are mutually collaborative teachers of and learners from each other. When we acknowledge and respect each other as teachers and learners, we greatly increase our chances of those feelings being reciprocated. If our ideas and values are respected and we feel valued, this may spur us on to learn and enhance our self-respect through being able to identify with the group. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) argue that when learners feel respected and treated as co-equal creators of knowledge, they are more likely to take discussion seriously. Having one's views listened to carefully and granted credibility by others is empowering for high-functioning autistic learners, who may, as I have suggested, think of themselves as failures. By sharing experiences, individual

problems and anxieties may begin to lessen in magnitude and the challenges of tackling a problem together may take on a different but more empowering type of intensity.

In conclusion, by using Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach and her central capabilities list as an ethical framework that is constantly evolving, and by using PNC and discussion as a practical application for enabling those capabilities, the complex relationship between the human faculties of emotion, communication, social skills and cognition can be addressed and embraced. Strengths can be nurtured, developed and acknowledged and that, in turn, can help develop self-esteem. Different and changing needs can be supported with the learner making informed, autonomous choices and decisions in the knowledge that s/he has someone or some people s/he can trust, confide in, and refer to for counsel.

As well as promoting understanding and explaining differences, fostering mutual enlightenment and strengthening social bonds, discussion can be a channel for social transformation, generating a better understanding of those who think differently. This not only develops a sense of goodwill towards others but promotes generosity and trust. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) suggest that people, when they feel valued and safe, become more willing to take risks and speak honestly, because these actions are more likely to be seen as beneficial. An atmosphere of openness may then be nurtured and learners may be more confident to be both teacher and learner. This is when the teacher-learner relationship then becomes truly collaborative, when all are learners and teachers. Moreover, such a relationship can promote group responsibility. When we acknowledge and respect others as teachers and learners, we increase the chances of those feelings being reciprocated, and in this way self-esteem for both the teacher and learner may increase. Additionally, by listening to others' ideas and opinions, thinking improves and our awareness sharpens as does

sensitivity to others and this heightens an appreciation of ambivalence and complexity, enabling us to locate ourselves in, and play our part in, a rich and diverse world. By really listening to others' ideas and opinions, some of which may appear at first to be outlandish and by respecting that there is more than one way of being human and interacting in this world, the support and teaching of high-functioning autistic learners may be improved.

In this dissertation I have discussed my three concerns regarding the support and inclusion of high-functioning autistic learners: the neoliberal agenda of a standardised and meritocratic education system creates a pressurized classroom; the nature of high-functioning autism is often misunderstood, and the importance of emotions is consequently undervalued because of pressures teachers and learners face in the classroom. I have also discussed possible improvements that can be made to their support using Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach as a lens and so I will now summarize my arguments by reflecting on each chapter in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion.

> There is a phrase in Nietzsche, 'I have told you my truth - now tell me your truth'.
>
> Hubert Griffith, *The Observer*, 1937

The above quotation reflects the idea, originally expressed by the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, that what is commonly taken for reality is an interpretation formed from the perspective of the individual who perceives that reality. Furthermore, each interpretation of reality is the assertion of will and the expression of individuality. Nietzsche (1883-1892) also argues that, as reality cannot really be represented in words because each individual's experience is different, knowledge is accrued through argument and the discussion of differing interpretations. This means that an individual comes to know something when her/his interpretation of an event or view on a topic is contrasted with another's, implying the notion of a dialogical relationship. Each time an individual engages with someone or something, s/he engages in a relationship, because the act of attempting to understand implies a conversation. That conversation involves self-examination of assumptions, perspectives and interpretations carried out through critical engagement with another and, through dialogue, an individual may reconsider what s/he perceives as reality and knowledge. This search for reality, this constant examination of consciousness is a means to self-realisation and flourishing, it is a constant evolution, which only terminates at the end of an individual's life journey. In this respect this Dissertation is itself a conversation contemplating my concerns as a SEND practitioner in a sixth form college in South London.

In this Dissertation, I have attempted to discuss and address the three main concerns that I have in my own working context as Head of Additional Learning Support and Inclusion at a London sixth form College. The first concern is that the current neoliberal agenda of a

standardised, meritocratic and employability driven education system creates a tension-laden classroom and pressurised learning environment defined by economic imperatives. The second concern is that the nature of high-functioning autism is often misunderstood. The third related concern is that the importance of emotions to learning and to understanding autism are undervalued because of the pressures that high-functioning autistic learners and teachers face in the classroom. Together these concerns can impede flourishing. It is with a resumé of my main arguments in the preceding chapters of this Dissertation that I will commence this final chapter. As this Dissertation is based, in part, upon my own personal and professional experiences, I will then explain how the writing of this work has taken me on my own journey of self-discovery and professional development, and how it has altered my own perceptions of education. Next, I will discuss the limitations of the Capabilities Approach and the parameters of this study, including here the challenges that this Dissertation has presented. I will conclude by explaining how the main strength of the Capabilities Approach, its consideration of the commonalities of the human experience and the human condition and exercise of human agency, may be maximized to promote both individual and communal flourishing in a diverse world.

In the first chapter of this Dissertation, having briefly outlined the three main concerns that I believe prevent the inclusion and effective support of learners with high-functioning autism in the classroom and that motivated me to write this Dissertation, I explained that the situation regarding the support of high-functioning autistic learners is multiplex. This is not simply because of the complex nature of autism, but because of the inter-related complexities of the structure, attitudes, norms and imperatives of the society within which an individual lives and which influence both society and the individual. The Dissertation that follows is then a detailed and layered discussion of all three concerns and my reasoning on why

Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach is an appropriate critical lens with which to analyse the current SEND support system and my argument that it offers a more suitable approach to the support of high-functioning autistic learners in the classroom than that currently in place.

To set the conceptual context within which I made my argument, in Chapter Two I gave an account of three different models of disability - the medical, social and biopsychosocial - within which the support for high-functioning autistic learners is located. I suggested that the biopsychosocial model is the most appropriate for the support of high-functioning autistic learners in the classroom and introduced its fit with Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach. In Chapter Two, I argued that this Capabilities Approach, with its list of ten central capabilities, represents an appropriate approach to the support of high-functioning autistic learners in the classroom. One key argument for adopting this approach is that it would allow a move away from neoliberal education policy based on social contract theory, standardisation and meritocracy. It recognises that individuals are not the same as each other in their physical and mental powers, but that all humans have an inherent dignity and an entitlement to life circumstances that nurture that dignity. Furthermore, intrinsic individual dignity validates each individual's vision and understanding of reality, and of being, doing, and flourishing, in every aspect of life. Additionally, in Chapter Two, I emphasised the way in which Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach identifies a learning difference, such as autism, as a deprivation in terms of capabilities, that is, a lack of opportunity to be or do. I suggested that the Capabilities Approach does not cohere with either the medical or social models of understanding disability and instead better co-locates with a biopsychosocial model, because it considers the complexity of what makes a person human. Moreover, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach recognizes the interconnection between rationality and emotion with a person's perceptions of the world created by emotions, thoughts and beliefs influenced by

biological, psychological and environmental factors. By providing opportunities and affording the capabilities for a person to evaluate and progress their life journey towards fulfilling their own needs and desires, the Capabilities Approach aims to achieve justice by securing valuable outcomes or goals to optimise a person's human flourishing, rather than merely securing her/his physical resources. The individual's capabilities are then influenced by the context in which s/he lives but justice requires that individuals have capabilities above a minimum threshold as set out in Nussbaum's list. Because of this, Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach accommodates a pluralistic approach to the choice of ways of living and the definition of what constitutes a good life for the individual. The approach endorses autonomy and freedom of choice for each individual and emphasises that all lives must be lives of dignity, with all persons entitled to respect.

Furthermore, the capabilities in Nussbaum's list are not interchangeable, that is they are non-fungible, and they cannot be measured simply in terms of access to resources. They are abstract to the extent that their value is subjective to and for each individual. For example, I may wish to read philosophical books just for the sake of enjoying learning, but another person might think this nonsensical in that it has no bearing on my daily life and is therefore a waste of time. However, only I can know the intrinsic value to myself of the reading of philosophical books, so the other person has neither the right to tell me what I should or should not do in the circumstances nor to make a value judgement about what I choose to do. Similarly, for this reason, as educators we sometimes need to take a step back. Even if we can see that a learner is about to make an error which s/he might later regret, because s/he is on her/his own life journey we should perhaps let her/him make it, assuming no significant harm will come to her/him or others. We should, however, be there to help her/him pick up the pieces if necessary after the consequences of these events unfold.

In Chapter Three of this Dissertation, I have explained in further detail the reasons for my concern that the current neoliberal agenda of a standardised and commodified education system creates a pressurised learning environment. I critically discussed the current SEND legislation and policy that is ensconced in the current education system. Here, I outlined how the values within this system are influenced by the values and ideas on education of Jeremy Bentham, who counselled the extension of education to the masses. His aim was to produce workers who would be able to read and write instructions and specifications, calculate numbers and quantities of product, and successfully understand and operate machinery in the factory and on the assembly-line. This was effectively the dawn of standardisation and surveillance, and part of its legacy is today's neoliberal education system based on meritocracy, accountability and blame. This has induced anxiety, fear and anger in the agents involved in learning, that is the learner and the teacher, resulting in a learning atmosphere that is fraught with pressure and anxiety. Also, in Chapter Three, I argued that the Capabilities Approach is a preferable alternative to the current standardised commodified education system because it represents a move away from a system which assesses the quality of lives by standardized grades and averages and focusses on the acquisition of material educational resources. My second concern, that high-functioning autism is often misunderstood, was re-introduced in Chapter Three and discussed in detail in Chapter Four. This misunderstanding is caused by a number of factors that interact with each other in a complex and intersectional way and, in Chapter Four, I attempted to detangle and discuss some of these complexities.

My third concern, that a tension-laden classroom, with aims defined by economic imperatives and focused on attainment and employability skills, tends to undervalue the importance of

emotions to education and the flourishing of the high-functioning autistic learners are at the heart of my study. I predominantly address this concern in Chapters Five and Six where I have argued that the Capabilities Approach goes beyond the neoliberal education system to focus on the flourishing of every individual. Here I focus on the Capabilities Approach and its acknowledgement of the importance of emotions to education. I argue here that the emotions of empathy and compassion are key prerequisites for the understanding and development of positive working relationships of trust between high-functioning autistic learners and their teachers. Through a continuous colloquy between the teacher and the learner, they may, I suggest, learn from and with each other. In Chapter Five, I also suggest that the Capabilities Approach recognises that emotion is intertwined with rationality and that characteristics such as vulnerability are part of the human condition. Vulnerability and the need for care are not indications of weakness, as they are so often understood and judged by societal norms, but form part of the inter-dependency of human beings which we all share, to a greater or lesser degree, at different times in our lives. Nussbaum (2006a) is clear.

> So the way we think about the needs of children and adults with impairments and disabilities is not a special department of life, easily cordoned off from the 'average case'. It also has implications for the way 'normals' (people with average flaws and limitations) think about their parents as they age. (Nussbaum, 2006a:101)

I suggest, then, that in my professional context working with high-functioning autistic learners, the Capabilities Approach, can promote individual flourishing through working relationships of trust founded upon empathy and compassion that require emotional awareness, literacy, and active listening. It is through these working relationships that high-functioning autistic learners may be able to develop self-esteem and may themselves become their own agents of change through recognizing and developing their strengths, capabilities and potential. Learners who feel listened to and respected are more likely to be confident, have high self-esteem, perform well academically, be happy, independent and motivated and

this will lead to a meaningful and fulfilled life. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) suggest that individual stories discussed as part of class debate about common experiences shaped by the same economic and political forces that exist in the larger society, enable learners and teachers to find a commonality and solidarity with each other, as well as to realise and reflect upon how life experiences shape the way an individual thinks and acts. I noted that one way in which the Capabilities Approach recognises the importance of emotions is by incorporating an Aristotelian understanding of human flourishing or *eudaimonia*. To reiterate the claim made in Chapter Five regarding empathy and compassion, *eudaimonia* embraces the idea of the pursuit of virtue or flourishing by helping another, which may have a different realisation for each person in their own individual context. Deci and Ryan (2006) maintain that well-being or flourishing within Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*:

> … is not so much an outcome or end state as it is a process of fulfilling or realising one's true nature-that is, of fulfilling one's daimon or true nature – that is of fulfilling one's virtuous potentials and living as one was inherently intended to live. (Deci and Ryan, 2006:2)

As suggested in Chapter Five, understood realities and potential are relative to individual context and perception. I have claimed in this dissertation that we need to learn to embrace different versions of the truth and different desires as valid, even if we do not necessarily agree with them. No one person's reality and desires are usually wrong, that is of course as Nussbaum (2010) argues as long as they respect another's dignity, they are just different up to a point. Everyone is entitled to a life of respect and dignity and if a person's desires or reality does not respect the dignity of another then it is not valid. This acceptance of different realities and desires is central to the education of high-functioning autistic learners in the classroom, who often feel that they do not fit into a standardised version of what it means to be considered 'normal' by society or as having 'normal desires and needs'. Furthermore, in order to teach someone, a teacher first has to understand how the learner sees her/his own reality. Using the dictum, 'I have told you my truth [reality] now tell me your truth [reality],'

the teacher can have a discussion without forcing the learner to first accept the teacher's own version of reality. In this dialogue between the teacher and the learner, the teacher is both teacher and learner and the learner both learner and teacher, growing, evolving and flourishing together. Although there may be some painful experiences along the way, I suggest that the whole of life should be a celebration of being and flourishing, and of self-realisation, the arrival at one's own reality. Moreover, it is our duty as educators to provide learners with the capability, at whatever stage of their journey they might be, to successfully pursue that journey, by giving them real learning opportunities that affect every aspect of their lives, especially through dialogue and collaboration in the classroom. For example, reflecting on my own practice, I have learned that patience and a keen ear for listening are crucial for effective teaching. My voice should not monopolize the conversation: I am a guest in the discussion and need to try to empathize with what the other person is feeling and meaning when s/he communicates with me. However, this type of active listening requires time and patience. If it is to be a major focus of any educational reform or development, then more time needs to be given over to develop such conversations. One way that this may be achieved is through the employment of macro-lessons which have been very successful at the college. This is where a lesson is up to three hours in length but includes many different types of activity and leaves flexibility for such discussion to develop, with of course, informal rest breaks factored within the lesson. However, I argue that the government needs to think seriously about the pressures that teachers are currently facing such as addressing the volume of administrative tasks that teachers are required to complete that may erode the amount of time that teachers can use to develop their working relationships with their learners.

In addition, the Capabilities Approach recognizes that there is no such thing as a normal person with normal intelligence and normal capacity, rather each person is a unique and creative thinker in her/his own right, with her/his own strengths, needs and desires. Furthermore, the Capabilities Approach recognizes the uniqueness of the contribution that all individuals can make to society in accordance with her/his own strengths and situation. This approach in education would focus on the development of the whole person rather than on merely endowing a person with a skillset to be able to obtain employment as a utilitarian means to an end for the benefit of the economic success of a society.

As a reflective practitioner, through researching and writing this Dissertation, I have come to realise that ableism runs deep in our culture. This is evident when high-functioning autistic learners are told that they are 'inspiring' when they do simple things such as submitting their homework on time. This is also evident in reports that confound intelligence and emotional and social functioning in, for example, a comment found in an EHC plan: 'she is intelligent but finds it hard to verbally express how she feels'. The inclusion of the word 'but' implies that the difficulty with verbal expression is in contrast to the learner's intelligence. However, finding it difficult to express how one feels does not mean that a person lacks intelligence in this area. For instance, the learner may know what she wants to say but she may find it physically difficult for the words to come out of her mouth due to a processing difficulty, a problem that I experience myself being dyspraxic.

Furthermore, there is ableism in the outcomes set by EHC plan case workers and educational psychologists and when SEND education policy aims to make high-functioning autistic learners become indistinguishable from their non-autistic peers, as if there were a standardised or accepted 'normal' way of being and thinking. Opposing ableism requires

accepting difference and understanding that intelligence comes in many forms and is expressed in many different ways. Through the Capabilities Approach, I have argued that high-functioning autistic learners may be provided with the most appropriate capabilities with accommodations designed from their own informed choices so that they may flourish.

This Dissertation has taken me on my own personal odyssey. Whilst writing it, I have been diagnosed with Developmental Co-ordination Disorder (DCD) commonly known as dyspraxia. My reaction when I received my diagnosis surprised me. I felt great relief and even happiness. Instead of seeing my diagnosis as a negative label signifying a disorder, as I thought I would, I saw it as an external affirmation and a celebration of who I am: my dyspraxia is part of me. During a discussion around diagnosis and labelling with one of high-functioning autistic learners with whom I work, the learner told me that her diagnosis was a good thing for her because it gave her a similarly positive affirmation. I did not understand her at the time and disagreed with her, but now I think I know what she meant. Since my own diagnosis, I see things from a different perspective, a more confident and positive perspective. Rather than moving away from diagnoses, perhaps the way a diagnosis is written and read by society in general needs to change. For example, instead of referring to a specific condition as a 'disorder' it might help to refer to it as a 'difference'. It is not the diagnosis that is the problem, it is society's idea of the diagnosis as a label that is the problem because of the assumptions and biases, both conscious and subconscious, therein. Diagnosis should not be a label, but an identification of the existence of experiences and characteristics shared by others, increasing a person's capacity to empathise with others. The labelling occurs when society labels a person with a diagnosis and puts them away in a cupboard. When, however, a diagnosis is identifying an existing phenomenon within one's own nature and being, that is a difference not a deficit. For this reason, the biopsychosocial model discussed

in Chapter Two, I believe, is most appropriate for understanding learning differences including autism.

However, as argued in Chapter Six, teaching with compassion and an honest capacity to actively listen is a capacity that develops and evolves over time and takes place in person and not, I believe, over a computer. It is a long-term goal and is connected to intrinsic motivation, that is doing an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for its consequence. This is interlinked with the feeling of being valued, autonomous and having purpose and that relies on honesty and compassion. Brookfield (2015) refers to honesty and warmth as prerequisites for building relationships of trust and compassion. Honesty refers to acknowledging where the learners are in their learning and where the teacher is in her/his own learning. This includes admitting that as teachers, although we may be competent and experienced in our particular fields, we do not know everything in our subject areas. I have argued that positive working relationships are an integral part of a mutual learning journey likening it to a type of friendship between the teacher, learner and peers as both a creative and a collaborative force. The human journey is a continuous act of transfiguration and if approached with friendship, this journey can be less fearful of the unknown, the negative and less characterised by threats and punishments. Through interaction and imagination, the power of endless possibility may be realised. In this way, friendships between teachers and learners are not sentimental relationships but are far more extensive and intensive forces in the development of human flourishing. Moreover, learning is complex and fluid, and ultimately all we can ask of ourselves and our learners is to be reflective. Being empathetic and compassionate means recognising the difficulties that we all face as part of humanity and so understanding that sometimes people just need to be heard, sometimes they need a solution, and sometimes they need both.

Furthermore, good outcomes are by-products of meaningful values, which can evolve through classroom discussion and reflection. I have suggested that this type of meaningful discussion, which requires honesty and courage on both the part of the learner and the teacher, may contribute to a feeling of what Nussbaum (2006a:77) calls affiliation. This affiliation, on a basis of self-respect and mutual non-humiliation, leads to the capacity to engage in various forms of social interaction, and to develop empathy. Through this type of affiliation, learners' self-esteem may be raised. In a neo-liberal education system, there is a presumption that learners attend college so that they can achieve qualifications leading to employment, because they want to lead fulfilling and meaningful lives. However, the interactions in the classroom between the teacher, the learners and the subject or theme that contribute to their flourishing are not dictated by any potential career path they may choose. It is that flourishing which, in my view and at the end of this study, lies at the heart of a real education for all learners.

Additionally, if teachers do not build upon emotional awareness and social interaction, or teach high-functioning autistic learners the complexities of social situations, then no matter how high the learner's academic performance, they may still be restricted by social barriers and low self-esteem. Learners need to be given the capability to develop their social functioning so that such barriers to success in society may be eased. If not, then social isolation and social anxiety, as a result of fear of interaction, may prevent the learner from finding opportunities in both their work and their life after they have left the college.

I have suggested that, in order to develop strong working relationships of trust we, as teachers, first need to be aware of our own perceptions, thoughts, feelings, emotions and

behaviours. We also need time to be able to regularly reflect on these, something that a senior leadership team in a school or college should provide, although this may be easier said than done in an environment that is so highly pressurised and overloaded with administrative systems and demands for data. Moreover, teachers first need to be compassionate with themselves in order to be able to be compassionate with their learners. As teachers, we need to acknowledge that we are individuals but are also part of a much bigger community often fraught with the demands of accountability and pressures, in both personal and professional contexts. We are also part of the bigger picture of the learner's life. As educators we may influence a learner's thoughts, perceptions and their opinions of both her/his internal and external worlds. This has a consequential effect on a learner's self-esteem and social functioning, particularly, I suggest, for high-functioning autistic learners who find communication and society difficult to navigate.

Compassion has its inhibitors and these need to be acknowledged. For instance, when we feel frustrated with learners it is difficult to be compassionate. Because compassion requires identification and empathy with others, the absence of compassion may involve disidentification, that is seeing others as different from ourselves. In order to be compassionate, we need to be able to find our common humanity by acknowledging our emotions, our vulnerability, and our interdependency, and we need to be able to imagine ourselves in the place of the other. However, we should not feel guilty if we do not feel compassionate, but should rather acknowledge our feelings and develop strategies to overcome them, such as taking time for reflection and rest. Of course, we also need to maintain healthy boundaries with our learners. Once a relationship of trust is developed, the high-functioning autistic learner may become over-attached, constantly seeking out a particularly trusted member of staff every time they feel anxious, or they may become

resentful because they feel they depend upon the working relationship with the teacher too much. However, if all teachers saw empathy and compassion as intrinsic to their teaching practice, learners might not feel the need to become over-attached to one member of staff, which might, in turn, affect their life choices and self-realisation for some time after they have left us. Our interactions and relationships with learners are pivotal in this, so we need to conduct them seriously and responsibly.

Limitations of the Capabilities Approach

Nussbaum's version of the Capabilities Approach is not a panacea and, of course, has its critics. One criticism that Charusheela (2009) proposes and which is relevant to the themes of this Dissertation is that the Capabilities Approach is too vague and universalistic. Nussbaum asserts that her version of the Capabilities Approach is necessarily universalistic, firstly so that it may be contextualised for any individual in any culture or society and, secondly because, by being indeterminate, it allows for each person to realize their own definition of the good. Nussbaum (1999) contends that:

> … being able to search for the meaning of life in one's own way is a central element of a life that is fully human. (Nussbaum, 1999:108)

Moreover, she acknowledges that the relationships between the capabilities are complex and that, in some areas, the list of central capabilities provides the most effective way of securing a right for someone, that is to enable that person to become fully capable within her/his own capacity of a particular functioning (Nussbaum, 2006a). This way each individual may make their own decisions about their life choices and flourishing.

Another criticism of Nussbaum's version of the Capabilities Approach is that it is too abstract to be useful in securing a person's rights because the capabilities are unmeasurable and intangible. Certainly, emotion, feeling, thought and well-being are all subjective and cannot

be measured, yet they all exist and, just because they cannot be measured, that surely does not mean they should be ignored. Nussbaum argues that the central capabilities are not a single normative approach but a partial theory of justice that can be adapted to any society. Furthermore, the Capabilities Approach provides a set of moral and humanistic goals, which are, by their very essence, abstract. In contrast, societies such as my own in the UK, bases its justice systems, as far as equality is concerned, on fiscal resources, just as globalisation pushes many nations towards the pursuit of economic growth as a measure of happiness and the good life. However, Nussbaum (2001a) suggests that money is a tool of human functioning, not happiness in itself and that the development of a nation is a human process. Therefore, governments should surely be concerned with assuring the threshold limit at which a person's capability becomes worthy of a human being. This also highlights, as argued in Chapter Two, the incompatibility of a funding driven education system with the aim of teaching the whole person which, by its very nature, is not expressible in monetary terms, and is abstract, dialogical, constantly evolving, and open to critical reflection. Nussbaum's list of central capabilities recognises this and, by being a threshold framework, allows for this constant evolution to take place. In Chapter Two, I outlined how the list does allow this but am aware that this discussion pertains only to my own working context and so cannot be generalised. Hence I turn now to the parameters of this study.

The parameters of this study

I have interpreted Nussbaum's argument in a personal and contextualised way specific to my own working environment, as this Dissertation is one that is personal to me and is based upon my personal and professional values, experiences and context. This might be considered a limitation. Other educational and medical practitioners and researchers may have alternative perceptions of how best to educate and support high-functioning autistic learners in the

classroom. Nevertheless, I would argue that this study is of value because it reflects experience and concerns from the classroom which, looking at social media posts and in discussion with colleagues in other institutions, appears to be common. There seems to be agreement that the relationships between high-functioning autistic learners and their teachers, not just their academic achievement, is what really matters. However, as argued in Chapters Five and Six, academic achievement is dependent upon fruitful working relationships between high-functioning autistic learners, their peers and their teachers. This is difficult to evidence empirically because the relationship between emotion, rationality, and academic performance is not measurable, but qualitative and subjective. However, performance data in my department has indicated over recent years that there has been a marked improvement of 22 per cent in final grades and 100 per cent of learners in the department for the last two years have either transitioned successfully to Higher Education or to gainful employment. This is since the implementation of the Capabilities Approach, Positive Niche Construction and SEMH curriculum in the department. The most recent Ofsted inspection, in January 2018, also reported that departmental statistics indicated that learners with SEND at the college achieve academically either the same as or better than their so-called 'able-bodied peers'.

As noted in the first chapter, there is a limitation on my learners' voices in that I conveyed their thoughts and views through them identifying with anecdotal excerpts from the Barron and Grandin (2016) book *Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships* that I read to them rather than using their direct voices because of ethical approval. This Dissertation was also non-inclusive to the extent that in that it does not include the voices of nor address the needs of sixth form college learners with more complex needs, for example, learners who are non-

verbal or have multiple complex medical and/or mental health conditions as currently there are no learners at the college who are non-verbal or who have such conditions.

Using my own professional experiences in this Dissertation has been a challenge because of ethical considerations and my choice not to seek approval for an empirical study. Learners with whom I work are aware of the writing of this Dissertation and were keen for me to use examples from my work in order to give them a voice. However, I have taken care to maintain anonymity whilst ensuring voices are heard, including my own. I have been careful to obtain signed permission where anonymity has not been possible. Also, this Dissertation does not focus on external factors that may play a part in the perception and behaviour of the high-functioning autistic learner in the classroom, such as culture or family circumstances, and it does not cover all of the difficulties and characteristics of autism, as this would be too much to cover in a single study.

Some scholarly readers of this Dissertation may criticize it for being excessively optimistic in its outlook. However, it is important to consider that the work has been written primarily within a specific context and with a particular audience in mind. My aim is for the work to become the basis for discussion between non-specialist and specialist educational practitioners alike, and with professional colleagues in other sectors such as in the medical profession, therapists and social workers, parents and guardians and learners themselves. Most, if not all, of the concepts discussed in this Dissertation are complex and sensitive, especially for people who may be unfamiliar with those concepts. Some may read this Dissertation in order to understand and help an autistic person that they love or work with and who may have a diagnosis, which may come with a feeling of stigma. My aim in this Dissertation is to try to help minimize internalized and external stigma and promote

discussion between the aforenoted groups of people as a starting point for further study and research. This should include the direct voice of the autistic learner her/himself through empirical study, starting with the question: what area of education do they think requires research or discussion? In this way then philosophical, sociological and psychological study and the voice of the learner might come together to inform and improve future policy and practice in the fields of autism study across the educational, social and medical fields.

Education is the most human of endeavours and it should be recognised as such. However, the current neo-liberal education value system and framework does not promote this view. Because our minds are shaped by our dispositions, perceptions and life experiences, there are as many different mindsets as there are learners, and many, including many learners with whom I work, have mindsets that do not respond to a standardised, memory-led approach to learning. As I conclude, I suggest that the real problem is not that of the learner but of an education system which does not aim to educate but to train. Anyone who does not conform to the standardised approach to education is somehow seen as a less than adequate learner. Creative and divergent thinkers such as high-functioning autistic learners need to think about and explore ideas and concepts and cannot just accept them and learn them in a conventional way. As a divergent thinker myself, I too have experienced this.

The understanding, inclusion and support of learners with SEND, including high-functioning autistic learners, has improved enormously over the past few decades. Empirical studies in psychology, neuroscience and philosophical research have helped to shape this development. However, fundamental change is still needed and it is necessary for fields of research to continue to come together in collaboration to improve our understanding of the nature of

learning differences and disabilities, especially hidden ones which, until recently, have been largely ignored. Hopefully, this Dissertation will have played a small part in this.

Furthermore, although the current neoliberal and utilitarian education system was, perhaps, initially founded upon good intentions, its reliance on outcomes and extrinsic measures has created a punitive culture of accountability and competition using fear and insecurity as drivers for achievement and development both collectively and individually. I have argued that punitive measures and wording such as 'inadequate' and threat-based strategies are short-sighted. They lack intellectual and moral credibility and integrity and they have a negative impact on how teachers and learners, perhaps especially high-functioning autistic learners, interact in the classroom. We need, instead, to promote a listening and nurturing culture in the classroom, as a way of ensuring the apprehension and employment of ideas and information in ways consistent with varying capabilities. An education system that does not allow learners and teachers to grow and develop, or forbids people to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes without feelings of guilt or shame, is not an education system: it is a system that results in the death of flourishing. Moreover, schools and colleges are not sterile institutions but organic entities which need to continuously evolve and to acknowledge and embrace the complex relationship between emotion, perception and cognition. Mechanistic standardised outcomes will not promote the flourishing of the individual. By contrast, outcomes defined in holistic and organic terms that intertwine with each other are appropriate, and using Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach could help achieve this.

Dissemination Strategies

I hope that the writing of this Dissertation will reach a wide and varied audience. Firstly, I hope to inform teaching colleagues, specialist and non-specialist alike within the college in

which I work, in other colleges nationally and in the teaching profession internationally with the aim of promoting self-reflection, discussion and collaboration between practitioners and learners, both autistic and non-autistic. I also hope that colleagues in other sectors who work with learners such as social workers, EHC plan case workers and NHS therapists, might read it so that they have an insight into the classroom experience for some autistic learners and teaching colleagues. However, I am aware that this is a lengthy document written to fulfil the requirements of a doctorate in education so an additional dissemination strategy is to write a summary which is more accessible and considerably briefer that this Dissertation.

Feedback so far from other professionals is that this study, disseminated in various talks I have given as noted below has helped to inform therapy, has improved understanding and has helped to set aside aims and outcomes when writing EHC plans for individual learners and when conducting annual reviews. Other practitioners, for example, at the City of London SENDCo Network and the Association of Colleges SEND Network and feedback from the blogs I have written for Optimus Education have stated that they have similar experiences, that they can see themselves in my story and that we appear to be 'on the same page'. Feedback from a presentation of the topics covered in this Dissertation given at Kingston and St Mary's Universities at Aim Higher Continuing Professional Development workshops and at the International Professional Development Association (IPDA) annual conference at Birmingham University in 2018 and virtually in 2022, has also mentioned that it has encouraged discussion and collaboration between sectors such as the NHS, social services and the education sectors internationally and within individual contexts and settings.

I would also like parents and guardians to read the Dissertation or my summary of it to gain an insight into the dilemmas that some of their children may face in their daily experiences at

college. This may provide a better understanding of why learners may come home exhausted or act in a certain way when they return home in the evening. The learners themselves may find it interesting to read as it may give them an insight into the perspectives of their teachers or provide a possible explanation as to why their teachers may behave in certain ways towards them. Moreover, it may provide a basis for discussion of further empirical study in which their voices may be heard directly. This may help move the focus of research concern away from what Hillary (2020) terms as 'hierarchies and harmful divisions within the autism community' and enable research, particularly further empirical inclusive research, to be guided by autistic people themselves in a way which Botha et al. (2021:695) describe as respecting 'inherent dignity of all disabled persons and allows them the freedom to make their own choices'.

I also hope that scholars and researchers at universities may find the Dissertation useful or at least interesting, as a voice from the 'chalkface' so to speak, highlighting the criticality of marrying theory with practice and promoting discussion with practitioners in schools and colleges and in other sectors. I have recently started to share the ideas from this Dissertation with international colleagues in schools in Hong Kong and over social media platforms such as LinkedIn and I would really like to open up discussion on a broader international platform, especially in academic circles.

At the end of this study, I also suggest that education policy should be doing more to support schools and colleges in supporting each other, rather than encouraging them to pit themselves in competition against each other through league tables, thereby eradicating empathy, compassion and collaboration on an institutional as well as an individual level. There needs to be a promotion of listening and nurturing in our schools, colleges and universities as a way

of ensuring people can perform at their best, from the level of the government to the chalk face. Furthermore, I argue that we have to start this by asking ourselves as educators what it is to be human. I follow Nussbaum and contend that, in asking this, we need to acknowledge that although each of us is a unique and dignified individual, our humanity is common and we are inter-dependent, and that we need to acknowledge our feelings, both negative and positive. We also need to acknowledge that an integral part of our role as teachers is to establish such relationships with our learners, so that we are able to affectively alleviate their suffering and nurture their flourishing. Part of achieving this is helping learners to unravel and articulate their own personal narratives, which are influenced by the views of others, some of which have had a detrimental impact on their self-esteem, and we should do this in ways which acknowledge that learners do not have disorders so much as differences in respect to learning.

The difficulties that high-functioning autistic learners face in the classroom discussed in Chapter Four, present significant barriers to flourishing in the classroom. Arguably, many high-functioning autistic learners need help to develop working relationships of trust in order to be able to make sense of the world and help them to articulate their own feelings, thoughts and beliefs in a constructive way. Showing humanity and compassion, fallibility, vulnerability and genuine empathy reminds others of our common humanity, and it might encourage the realignment of misaligned minds. We also need to understand the intrinsic complexity of what we are asking the learners to do. Relationships of trust are built upon acknowledging the complexities of the human experience in all aspects of an individual's life, both within and outside the school or college environment, and showing at least a willingness to connect with others in order to prevent feelings of social isolation as described in Chapter Four. In June 2020, the mental health charity Mind declared a mental health

emergency in the UK. A Mind report (2020) stated that, of 14,421 respondents of adults aged 25 plus and 1,917 respondents of young people aged 13-24, 76 per cent of adults and 69 per cent of young people said that their mental health had declined during the pandemic lockdown in 2020. The crowded beaches, pubs and restaurants immediately after lockdown was lifted are also testimony to this. Indeed, I have witnessed a sharp decline in the mental health during lockdown of the learners that I teach, as I have been both teaching remotely and attending to the needs of learners at the college. This sorrowful and worrying consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that we humans are indeed social beings who need love and understanding and that, as Nussbaum argues, no matter how much we may like being alone, we are also dependent upon each other and share common vulnerabilities as part of our human condition.

Perhaps what may emerge from this pandemic is a different world in which human values and relationships have a more central focus. I am of the view that the builders of this new world of which every human being is a part, will be its creative and divergent thinkers. Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, including her list of central capabilities, can be used as a guide to pedagogy, a threshold framework of ways to enable flourishing by influencing the way that we interact with each other both in the classroom and in everyday life. Its strength lies in its consideration of the commonalities of the human condition and human life and its simultaneous accordance of the maximum possible capacity for the exercise of human agency to the individual, to diverse societies, and to the different understandings of what constitutes the good life that the individual may have. It is these human commonalities that maximise the capacity to exercise human agency and that are developed through the dialogue between learners and their teachers, as argued in Chapter Six, and it is surely the responsibility of educators to ensure that every learner, who each has a part to play in the future world, has the

opportunity to develop these skills. We have a particular important duty to reach out to each learner autistic and non-autistic alike, but particularly those learners such as high-functioning autistic learners, who may feel marginalised in the classroom and to ensure their equitable access to their own definition of the good life by trying to really get to know and understand them as unique. In this way, and at the end of this study, I suggest that the individual, learner or teacher, high-functioning autistic or otherwise, can help both themselves and each other to flourish both inside and outside of the classroom.

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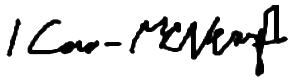
Appendix A

I, Isaac Carr-McVeagh give my permission for my story to be used as an example in Ms Hopp's dissertation 'Towards Better Support for High-Functioning Autistic Learners in a Mainstream Sixth Form Classroom.'

Signed: 

Date: 10th October 2021

I, Jessica Maunder give my permission for my story to be used as an example in Ms Hopp's dissertation 'Towards Better Support for High-Functioning Autistic Learners in a Mainstream Sixth Form Classroom.'

Signed: 

Date: 10th October 2021

I, Nathaniel Magoon give my permission for my story to be used as an example in Ms Hopp's dissertation 'Towards Better Support for High-Functioning Autistic Learners in a Mainstream Sixth Form Classroom.'

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Date: 10th October 2021

I, Ross Thomas give my permission for references to my teaching and the SEMH curriculum to be used as an example in Sarah Hopp's dissertation Towards Better Support for High-Functioning Autistic Learners in a Mainstream Sixth Form Classroom.'

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Date: 10th October 2021