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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Reducing Emotional Burden Carried by Neurodivergent Students in School: Perspectives From Students and School Staff

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Abstract

Purpose Compared to neurotypical peers, neurodivergent students experience increased exposure and more intense responses to commonly upsetting events (emotional burden), contributing to poor mental health. Student and staff perspectives offer insights into sources of emotional burden in school and how they can be managed and reduced. However, student and staff perspectives are rarely explored together.

Methods Focus groups with students (11–16 years, n = 11) with autism or ADHD diagnoses, and school staff (n = 12) were used to explore the impact of the school environment on students' emotions. Multimedia methodologies supported communication and participation.

Results Reflexive thematic analysis generated three themes: Theme 1 "Upsetting experiences in school that trigger negative emotions" with subthemes: (i) an overwhelming and uncertain physical environment; (ii) a lack of belonging and understanding; (iii) inflexible school policies; (iv) an overemphasis on academic achievement; Theme 2 "Staff-specific barriers to supporting neurodivergent students" with subthemes (i) staff wellbeing; (ii) inconsistent understandings of, and support for, neurodivergent students; and Theme 3 "Promoting emotionally healthy school environments" with subthemes: (i) whole school collaboration and action; (ii) positive approaches and agency; (iii) building trust, understanding and belonging; (iv) close staff relationships, training and supervision.

Conclusion Staff and students had shared understandings of stressors, staff through observing behaviour, students through internal experience. Both reported helpful practices, primarily environmental adaptations to accommodate students' needs. Staff also reflected on their own wellbeing, training and supervision. These insights offer a nuanced understanding of student and staff knowledge to inform policy, practice, and research in school settings.

Keywords School emotion regulation · AUTISM · ADHD · Focus groups

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Introduction

Both Autism and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are linked to elevated risks of adolescent depression, self-harm and suicide (Cassidy et al., 2020; Leyfer et al., 2006; Reale et al., 2017; Simonoff et al., 2008). It is generally acknowledged that these risks stem from interactions between neurodevelopmental differences and adverse environments (Thapar et al., 2023). As a key environment in adolescents' lives, schools have significant potential to shape not only academic but also mental health outcomes (Dräger et al., 2024; Ford et al., 2018). School policies in the UK and internationally increasingly call for whole-school approaches to adolescent mental health, emphasising inclusion, belonging, and culturally responsive practices (Margaretha et al., 2023; Public Health England, 2023). Yet Autistic and ADHD adolescents face persistent emotional challenges in mainstream secondary schools, due to academic pressure, sensory strain, inconsistent support and peer difficulties (Donaldson et al., 2024; Lukito et al., 2025; Russell et al., 2023). Many experience intense stress due to high workloads, deadlines and assessments, while experiencing social exclusion or unsafe peer interactions that damage self-esteem (Horgan et al., 2023; Pavlopoulou et al., 2025a).

Given the context, it is surprising that many mental health interventions for neurodivergent individuals often only target individual characteristics, particularly with regard to top-down emotion regulation difficulties, while overlooking how environments shape their everyday emotional experiences (Cavanagh et al., 2017; Cisler et al., 2010; Cole et al., 2017; Fairchild et al., 2019; Joormann & Stanton, 2016). Commonly used interventions, such as self-regulation programmes or generic approaches like Zones of Regulation (Kuypers, 2011), lack robust evidence and rarely address environmental or systemic contributors to distress such as punitive disciplinary practices, sensory overload, overly high academic standards and a lack of neurodiversity-informed teacher training, despite such factors being consistently reported by neurodivergent youth (Lukito et al., 2025; Pavlopoulou et al., 2025a). Moreover, these programmes seldom accommodate neurodivergent sensory, cognitive, or communicative differences (Bennett et al., 2024; Mason et al., 2024). The impact of widely promoted school-based mindfulness programmes also remains limited and may be reduced for students experiencing greater mental health challenges, highlighting the need to understand individual differences (Foulkes et al., 2025; Kuyken et al., 2022). Such programmes overlook systemic contributors to distress, risking misalignment with emerging policy priorities that emphasise structural change over individual 'fixes' (Public Health England, 2023).

Our RE-STAR research programme (https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/re-star) shifts the focus from within-person deficits to the cumulative impact of repeated upsetting school experiences. We have found that neurodivergent adolescents face higher exposure to emotionally distressing school events, experienced with twice the intensity, resulting in twice the school-induced emotional burden, compared to their neurotypical peers (Lukito et al., 2025). Furthermore, emotional burden was strongly associated with anxiety and depression levels cross-sectionally (Lukito et al., 2025). Upsetting experiences for neurodivergent students can arise not only during peer interactions but also from staff responses shaped by limited training, systemic pressures to maintain high attendance, behaviour compliance and academic performance and inconsistent inclusion practices, sometimes leading to detentions, exclusions, or rigid classroom routines that escalate distress (Brede et al., 2017; Guldberg et al., 2022). Although many educators value inclusion, they frequently report a lack of confidence, insufficient professional development and significant occupational stress when working with neurodivergent students (Humphrey & Symes, 2013; MacLean et al., 2023).

In developing interventions to reduce school-induced emotional burden, it is essential that we listen to the views of both students and staff (Jessiman et al., 2023; Pavlopoulou et al., 2025a). Policy guidance and research increasingly emphasise the need for co-designed mental-health strategies and experience-driven solutions (Pavlopoulou et al., 2025b; Public Health England, 2023), yet studies that explore together first-person accounts from both neurodivergent students and the school staff who support them remain scarce. This is necessary to understand how different or closely aligned these perspectives are, and to inform sustainable school policy and practice. Given global moves toward mandatory whole-school mental-health frameworks, the urgency of integrating these voices has never been greater. In this study, we addressed this gap by conducting focus groups with Autistic and/or ADHD secondary students and with school staff to explore: (i) the sources of emotional burden in school for neurodivergent students and (ii) strategies that students and staff view as most effective for improving neurodivergent adolescents' emotional experiences. We employed multimedia and applied-theatre methodologies to center participants' voices and offer a platform for each group to listen to each other.

Methods

Ethics

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at King's College London (HR/DP-22/23-36,309 and LRS/DP-22/23-36,100). Informed written young person assent/consent, parent/carer consent, and school staff consent were obtained from all participants.

Participants

Students were recruited from a pool of participants originally recruited through National Health Service clinics, Autism and ADHD charities, and social media as part of another RE-STAR study (Pavlopoulou et al., 2025a). Inclusion criteria were (i) aged 11 to 16 years, (ii) attending a UK mainstream secondary school, and (iii) having a diagnosis of ADHD, Autism, or both. Of the 23 students invited from the wider study cohort who met the inclusion criteria, places were allocated on a first-come, first-served basis among families who expressed interest and whose young people gave consent and were available to attend the scheduled sessions, while also aiming for a more balanced representation and broad variation in diagnosis, age, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic background where possible. In the end, 11 students aged 11 to 16 years old (M_{age} = 13.8, SD = 1.83) with a diagnosis of Autism (N = 4), ADHD (N = 4) or both (N = 3), all of whom attended UK mainstream secondary schools at the time, participated in the sessions (see Table 1).

School staff were recruited through RE-STAR partner charity Place2Be, the RE-STAR programme's existing school contacts and social media. Thirty-five school staff expressed an interest in taking part by completing a short online form. Inclusion criteria included experience working with Autistic and ADHD students in UK mainstream secondary schools and availability to attend all or most online Monday meetings during after-school hours. Where multiple staff held the same role, final participants were selected based on their teaching experience, lived experiences and diverse backgrounds.

We selected the final group (n = 12) from 10 schools to represent a range of school roles (see Table 2). Two pairs of staff worked in the same school. Students attended different schools. Staff and students did not attend the same schools.

Procedures

We ran online parallel sessions with students and school staff outside school hours over 15 months. LL and MK led student sessions and staff sessions were led by JH, MK and GP. Each session lasted 75–120 min. All sessions were held on Zoom, recorded and transcribed. Session agendas and task instructions were emailed in advance.

Student sessions were co-facilitated by two neurodivergent young people, part of RE-STAR's Youth Researcher Panel (Y-RP), who co-facilitated activities, supported rapport-building, adapted multimedia delivery of tasks and helped create a comfortable and accessible discussion environment for participants. The Y-RP comprises 17 young people (aged 18–25 at recruitment) with Autism and/or ADHD and played a pivotal role as co-researchers throughout the RE-STAR programme (see Sonuga-Barke et al., 2024 for a detailed description of the Y-RP role in RE-STAR).

For both student and staff groups, the study procedure involved three components: (i) three initial consultation sessions to agree on the aims of the focus groups and discuss ways of working and preferred ways communication; (ii) five focus group sessions with each group on students' emotional experiences; and (iii) three shared exchange sessions (two with staff and one with students) using the adapted verbatim format, a technique commonly used in applied theatre

Table 1 Student demographics

Pseudonym	Neurodevelopmental diagnosis	Sex assigned at birth	Age (in years)	Ethnicity	Receiving free school meals	Number of sessions attended
Harry	Autism + ADHD	Male	16	White	Yes	All
Helen	Autism + ADHD	Female	12	Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	Yes	Three
Maya	ADHD	Female	13	White	No	All
Charlie	Autism	Female	13	White	No	All
Dylan	Autism	Male	13	White	No	All
Henry	ADHD	Male	16	White	No	All
Jude	Autism	Male	16	Mixed/Multiple Ethnic groups	No	All
Jackson	Autism	Male	12	Mixed/Multiple Ethnic groups	Yes	One
Lucas	ADHD	Male	11	White	No	All
Meredith	ADHD	Female	15	White	No	All
Benjamin	Autism + ADHD	Male	15	Asian/Asian British	No	Four

Table 2 School staff demographics

Pseudonym	School role*	Age (in years)	Sex assigned at birth	Ethnicity	Years in current school	Teaching experience	Personal/family experience of neurodivergence	Training in Autism and ADHD	Number of sessions attended
Amelia	School project manager	52	Female	White	6 years	7 years	Yes	Yes	Four
Arya	Learning support assistant	45	Female	Asian/Asian British	7 years	7 years	Yes	No	Five
Anika	Head of year	30	Female	Asian/Asian British	7/8 years	8 years	Yes	Yes	Five
Maeve	Head of the year	26	Female	White	Under 1 year	3 years	Yes	Yes	Four
Catherine	Special education needs co-ordinator	40	Female	Asian/Asian British	7 years	18 years	Yes	Yes	Five
Sophia	Mental health lead	49	Female	White	12 years	12 years	Yes	Yes	All
Evie	Deputy head of the year	51	Female	White	4 years	18 years	Prefer not to say	Yes	All
Arthur	Higher-level teaching assistant	24	Male	White	1 year	1 year	No	Yes	All
Anna	Teacher	25	Female	White	3 years	3 years	Prefer not to say	Yes	Five
Rosie	Family support manager	35	Female	White	1.5 years	12 years	Yes	No	Two
Beatrice	Education consultant	49	Female	White	Not applicable	Over 20 years	Not recorded	Yes	Four
Charlotte	School counsellor	66	Female	White	20 years	10 years	Yes	Yes	Five

*Most staff had multiple school roles. The table reports on their key roles

(Inchley et al., 2019). The number of sessions was determined based on the topics to be covered and the need to provide participants with sufficient space to share their ideas, while also being mindful of students' and school staff's busy lives.

During the initial consultations, students emphasised the importance of improving staff understanding of Autism and ADHD, and the need for meaningful impact with staff, who genuinely listen and act on the students' input. Embedding this expectation was central to respecting student voices and aligning with an experience-sensitive approach (McGreevy et al., 2026). Staff expressed curiosity about their own feelings, well-being and experiences, recognising that these factors may act as barriers to providing the level of support for their neurodivergent students.

During the focus group sessions, students talked about what school-related factors can trigger negative emotions in school, what helps them manage these negative emotions, what makes them feel good in school and how schools should be to support Autistic and ADHD students to have their best emotional lives. School staff shared their understandings of Autism and ADHD and their impact on their job and wellbeing, the impact of the school environment on the emotional experiences of Autistic and ADHD students, ways of improving emotional experiences of neurodivergent young people, the barriers they experience and the support they need.

In addition to the five focus groups conducted with school staff, which primarily explored the impact of the school environment on neurodivergent students' emotional experiences, we ran an additional session to explore staff members' own emotional experiences within the school environment. During earlier sessions, staff repeatedly identified their own emotional strain, workload and capacity as shaping how they responded to neurodivergent students. As such, this additional session was included to better understand a staff-identified contextual factor influencing the relational and environmental conditions experienced by students, rather than to shift the focus of the study away from students' emotional burden. Table 3 shows the topics covered in all sessions.

During the shared exchange sessions, we used the verbatim formula where staff listened to anonymised student quotes presented as short audio clips (Session 1) and through discussions with neurodivergent Y-RP members (Session 2), who reflected on past school experiences informed by student focus group data. Overall, we utilised multimedia materials (e.g., such as drawing and collage) and platforms (e.g., Padlet, Mentimeter, Jamboard), primarily with students, with the intention to reduce power imbalances, support safety and facilitate authentic communication. For example, participants could share ideas in relation to the themes we introduced before, during, or after the sessions, via email or digital platforms such as Jamboard, if they needed extra time to process information or wanted to share something anonymously.

Analysis

The core analysis team included MK, JH, GP and LL. Transcripts from the focus groups were analysed line-by-line, alongside the multimedia materials (e.g., Padlet, Mentimeter

Table 3 Topics discussed by students and school staff in the focus groups*

Students	School staff
Session 1 research questions Can you think about your emotions using a fictional character? What does the eye see? What is actually happening? (backstory) How does this character experience big emotions? Why do we relate to them? Could this character educate anyone about the emotions we feel? What would this character do about a challenging situation?	*Session 1 research questions* What is your understanding of Autism and ADHD? What is the impact of having Autistic and ADHD students i) on the way you do your job? ii) on your own wellbeing in school?
Session 1 methodologies At home, students created their fictional characters using drawing, colleague and comic features They added their creations to the JamBoard and talked about them with the group during the session	*Session 1 methodologies* During the session, staff shared ideas on their understanding of ADHD and Autism using Padlet. Specifically, they were asked to write three words or phrases or an acrostic poem Staff reflected on the impact of working with Autistic and ADHD students in small Zoom breakout groups
Session 2 research questions What triggers negative emotions in school? What helps manage negative emotions in school?	*Session 2 research questions* How do you think school impacts the emotions of Autistic and ADHD students & the school staff (that includes you!) they interact with?
Session 2 methodologies At home, students added text, photos and drawings about school-related emotional triggers to a JamBoard page During the session, each student took a turn and talked about their triggers	*Session 2 methodologies* Staff shared their ideas with the whole group Staff also posted ideas on Padlet
Session 3 research questions What triggers negative emotions in school?	*Session 3 research questions* What are the best ways to improve the emotional experiences of young people with Autistic and/or ADHD traits & school staff? What do you think are the barriers to improving the experience of young people in school, especially those with Autistic and/or ADHD traits? What school support do you receive & what type of support do you need/your drivers?
Session 3 methodologies Students continued talking about their creations in relation to school-related emotional triggers	*Session 3 methodologies* Staff shared their ideas with the whole group Staff also posted ideas on Padlet
Session 4 research questions What makes young people feel good in school?	*Session 4 research questions* What triggers negative emotions in school for neurodivergent students? What makes neurodivergent students feel good in school?
Session 4 methodologies At home, students added text, photos and drawings about feel-good factors in school During the session, each student took a turn and talked about their triggers	*Session 4 methodologies* Staff listened to audio clips and viewed artwork presenting selected student perspectives from the focus groups. The clips included student quotes chosen by academic researchers and Youth Research Panel (Y-RP) members. Staff then shared their responses to these perspectives
Session 5 research questions RE-STAR's academic researchers share the school staff's perspectives using the verbatim formula Students design the perfect school: How can we make school a place where ADHD/Autistic students have their best emotional lives?	*Session 5 research questions* RE-STAR's academic researchers share students' perspectives School staff design the perfect school: How can we make school a place where ADHD/Autistic students & school staff have their best emotional lives, in a way that is attainable for schools?

Table 3 (continued)

Students	School staff
Session 5 methodologies Students listened to audio clips presenting selected staff perspectives from the focus groups. The clips included staff quotes chosen by academic researchers and Y-RP members, considering the group's age. Students then shared their responses to these staff perspectives Students used Jamboard to identify three actions they would take as headteachers to reduce emotional burden for neurodivergent students *No session*	*Session 5 methodologies* Staff continued listening to audio clips presenting student perspectives. Staff then shared their responses to these perspectives Whole group discussion on designing the perfect school *Session 6 research questions* RE-STAR's Y-RP members share students' perspectives & dialogue with staff *Session 6 methodologies* Four Y-RP members build upon quotes from the student groups to reflect on their past school experiences Dialogue between Y-RP members, staff and academic researchers on barriers, facilitators and positive emotional experiences in school, *Session 7 research questions* What common negative emotions do you (as staff) experience in school? What things can contribute to your negative emotions in school? *Session 7 methodologies* Whole group discussion on staff's triggers of negative emotional experiences in school *No session*

*All five student sessions were analysed. For staff, all sessions were analysed, except for Session 6, which focused on a dialogue between the Y-RP members and staff

and JambBoard), in NVivo using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2023). Specifically, alongside the transcripts from each session, we imported all text from the interactive platforms into NVivo for analysis. All artistic materials, such as drawings and collages, included oral and written quotes that we also transferred in NVivo to include in the formal analysis.

We conducted the analysis in several stages to preserve the integrity of each group's perspectives while enabling synthesis across staff and student datasets. First, student and staff transcripts were analysed separately. JH and MK coded the staff focus groups and LL and MK coded the student focus groups. Each researcher coded their assigned transcripts independently, and all codes were then combined within a single NVivo file for each group.

Following data familiarisation, we developed initial codes and generated themes within each group. We then reviewed within-group themes and sub-themes and checked for shared patterns across the two group datasets to generate overarching themes and sub-themes, while maintaining attention to group-specific nuances.

The core analysis team (JH, MK, GP, and LL) engaged in iterative discussions and developed thematic maps that identified higher-order patterns across both groups. This comparative process led to two overarching themes capturing shared insights across students and staff, alongside a separate theme representing staff-specific perspectives on barriers (Liamputtong, 2011; Morgan, 1997).

Positionality and Reflexivity

We drew upon a "critical realism" approach, acknowledging that our different backgrounds and types of expertise influenced how we analysed the focus groups (Botha, 2025). The team included both neurotypical and neurodivergent researchers with expertise in educational and developmental psychology, psychiatry, neurodiversity, arts and applied theatre and participatory research. Members also had experience in UK primary and secondary school settings and some in clinical practice. This work is informed by a neurodiversity perspective, which moves away from a deficit model focused on "fixing" neurodivergent young people and instead emphasises the role of (school) environments in shaping the mental health and everyday experiences of neurodivergent students (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2025). Prior to this study, we conducted an interview study exploring neurodivergent students' emotionally upsetting school experiences (Pavlopoulou et al., 2025a) and factors that help prevent and manage these experiences (Pavlopoulou et al., 2025b). These prior findings, alongside the team's multidisciplinary expertise, informed the focus of the present focus groups on the school context as a source of

emotional burden and the use of participatory, multimedia methodologies.

We explicitly discussed their subjectivity and positionality during weekly and monthly meetings. We also kept notes after the student and staff groups. We discussed any coding disagreements in meetings and recognised the value of subjective interpretations in refining the findings.

Results

The student and staff transcripts covered three overarching themes: "Upsetting experiences in school that trigger negative emotions" (Theme 1), "Staff-specific barriers to supporting neurodivergent students" (Theme 2) and "Promoting emotionally healthy school environments" (Theme 3), with some between-group differences at the sub-theme level. Nuances and contrasts across the student and staff perspectives are highlighted in the presentation of themes below. Due to the format of the focus groups, we did not explore differences per diagnosis (see Discussion).

The themes, sub-themes and summaries of themes for staff and students are presented in Table 4 and discussed below.

Theme 1: Upsetting Experiences in School That Trigger Negative Emotions

This theme highlights several upsetting school experiences that trigger negative emotions in neurodivergent students, as identified by both groups. This included four sub-themes: (i) an overwhelming and uncertain physical environment; (ii) a lack of belonging and understanding; (iii) inflexible school policies; and (iv) an overemphasis on academic achievement. Figure 1 shows artwork from a neurodivergent student about their emotionally upsetting experiences in school.

Sub-Theme 1: An Overwhelming and Uncertain Physical Environment

Both staff and students identified the physical environment as a key trigger of students' negative emotions. Students struggled emotionally in sensory over-stimulating environments (e.g., corridors, breaktime) that were too noisy (e.g., large crowds, barging), smelly or had the wrong temperature (e.g., hot):

> Busy corridors can cause stress because they make me feel overwhelmed and anxious. They're very crowded and cramped. (Maya, ADHD student, age 13).

School staff commented that some Autistic students were "unable to deal with change" to timetables, classrooms and their layouts, especially when not communicated early:

Table 4 Themes and sub-themes for students and school staff

Theme	Sub-theme	Key aspects of themes
Theme 1: Upsetting experiences in school that trigger negative emotions	Sub-theme 1: An overwhelming and uncertain physical environment	Sensory overload for students Uncertainties for students
	Sub-theme 2: A lack of belonging and understanding	Students feel lonely and misunderstood Students hide their emotions
	Sub-theme 3: Inflexible school policies	Restricted student and staff autonomy Lack of or limited accommodations for students
	Sub-theme 4: An overemphasis on academic achievement	Pressure and workload for both
Theme 2: Staff-specific barriers to supporting neurodivergent students	Sub-theme 1: Staff wellbeing	Feeling overwhelmed, drained, hopeless and dysregulated
	Sub-theme 2: Inconsistent understandings of, and support for, neurodivergent students	Limited staff/peer knowledge and understanding of Autism and ADHD Staff struggle to manage different needs
Theme 3: Promoting emotionally healthy school environments	Sub-theme 1: Whole school collaboration and action	Normalising differences Staff and students work together
	Sub-theme 2: Positive approaches and agency	Consistent use of positive approaches (e.g., kindness, non-stigmatising language and leveraging students' interests) -Options to de-escalate (e.g., access to a calming space)
	Sub-theme 3: Building trust, understanding and belonging	-Understanding and validating the experiences of Autistic and ADHD students
	Sub-theme 4: Close staff relationships, training and supervision	Staff time to reflect with colleagues -Positive staff relationships -Up-to-date training and supervision Listening from Autistic and ADHD students

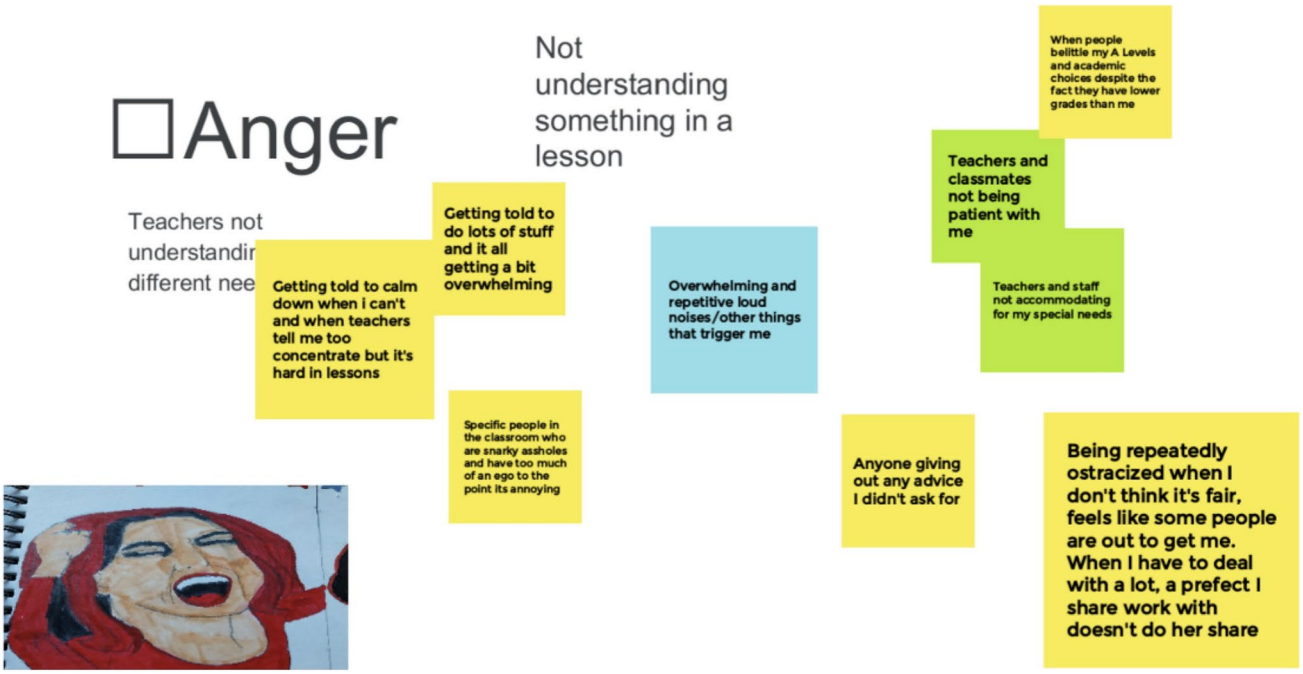


Fig. 1 Artwork from a neurodivergent student.: This artwork was created by a neurodivergent student to illustrate everyday emotionally upsetting experiences in school (Meredith, ADHD, age 15)



Fig. 2 Artwork and quote from a neurodivergent student. They're (students and staff) trying to paint me to be like this monotone person who doesn't have the feelings that I do have (Charlie, Autistic, age 13)

If we've got classroom changes, they're (Autistic students) so used to a set classroom, that layout, so then if they have to move to another classroom, they can struggle with it. (Evie, Deputy head of the year).

This sense of uncertainty due to unexpected changes created "frustration" and "anxiety" for many students. As identified both by students and staff, unpredictability was often exacerbated by the presence of supply staff (teaching staff, often external, who temporarily replace permanent staff during absences such as sick days in UK schools). This combined a change in routine with a lack of knowledge of individual needs:

Supply teachers are not aware of an individual student's needs, then you're picking up the pieces for the rest of the day. If that lesson goes wrong for them, it can have a huge impact. (Evie, Deputy head of the year).

Sub-Theme 2: A Lack of Belonging and Understanding

This sub-theme was present in both the staff and student discussions. Students reported struggling with others' reactions, feeling "weird", "infantilised" and "alone" (see Fig. 2).

Staff agreed that Autistic and ADHD students often experienced rejection and loneliness or were misunderstood:

Some children find it really difficult to accept that one child is allowed to be in their PE kit every day, all day and they're allowed to have their hair down while everybody else has it tied back. (Sophia, Mental health lead).

Students shared examples in which staff also struggled to understand different ways of "behaving" or communicating ("not making eye contact"), which could lead to punishment.

> "I just feel really frustrated because sometimes people (staff) don't understand if I want to be left alone. Sometimes I might snap, which I don't want to seem rude, but sometimes if I'm already upset, people keep pestering me." (Benjamin, Autistic + ADHD student, age 15)

Other students often perceived accommodations as 'special treatment':

> They (peers) don't really understand that sometimes teachers have to make a bit of allowances for me because I struggle a bit more than they do. (It) upsets me because…I'm not being rude. (Helen, Autistic + ADHD student, age 12)

As a result, students reported hiding their feelings in school due to shame, stigma around their condition, or an unwillingness to burden others:

> I try to hide my emotions…I feel ashamed of myself… I don't want people outside of my friend group to know that I'm ADHD. (Lucas, ADHD student, age 11)

Sub-Theme 3: Inflexible School Policies

Staff, in particular, highlighted that teachers and learning support assistants lacked the autonomy to meet students' needs, constrained by inflexible, 'punitive' school behaviour policies that did not always align with their assessment of a situation. Such policies limited their ability to make accommodations, including offering extra learning support for undiagnosed students who were "under the radar".

Staff acknowledged that the school placed emphasis on managing difficult behaviour rather than providing emotional support. Students could "easily get caught up in the behaviour system". Staff also recognised that the heterogeneity of neurodivergent students made set interventions and one-size-fits-all approaches less effective:

> I see teachers who are stressed because they want to be compassionate and give that support, but they are being forced to apply these rules, which shouldn't really be applied to students with different needs. (Charlotte, School counsellor)

Students, on the other hand, talked mainly about their internal states of anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, lonely, ashamed or upset (as illustrated above) and less frequently about external behaviours, such as being upset and angry, leading to "being told to calm down (because) apparently I'm going over the top" or to getting into trouble or detentions. One spoke of "saying the wrong thing" and later regretting that and feeling "really stressed":

> In school, when I'm not on it (ADHD medication), I tend to get into more trouble, which results in me being removed from the class or getting detentions that are quite long. I'm usually either upset or angry… Sometimes I will start crying. (Helen, Autistic + ADHD student, age 12)

In such a "busy and hectic" environment, staff could not consistently implement the practices they recognised as important, such as "taking time to listen" or "building relationships with students". Time to reflect either on their own or in discussion with other staff was limited:

> There was a chance to sort of think about students more across the board, but it's been whittled down, mainly due to the time that staff have to spend in behaviour modification (with students) getting taken out of class. (Charlotte, School counsellor)

Sub-Theme 4: An Overemphasis on Academic Achievement

Students described feeling pressured by academic demands, particularly the expectation to produce high-quality work and maintain focus on unengaging tasks, challenges especially difficult for ADHD students. Some felt their ideas "flew out" or that they were too slow, leading to feelings of inadequacy. Failing to meet personal, parental or peer expectations made them feel "small" or as if they "shouldn't be there anymore":

> (I prefer) tasks that don't involve much teamwork because I find it really hard to communicate with people sometimes, especially when I do not know them that well." (Dylan, Autistic student, age 13)

Short deadlines, limited agency and pressure to conform were "an anxiety multiplier", which, staff and students reported, could lead to "a massive strop", triggering exclusion and a further cycle of negative emotions and rejection.

> "I've always been the one expected to get high grades. I feel like if I get low grades, then what point is there of me being there? I (feel) stressed, I feel small." (Jackson, Autistic student, age 12)

The "added stress" of "staff keeping on" and of deadlines for "too many tasks" added to emotional pressures:

> School is what destroys that sense of belonging and confidence in myself, During the high school years, nearing the end with exams, because that was a lot of mental stress to me. It broke me. (Harry, Autistic + ADHD student, age 16)

All staff acknowledged the damaging effects of overemphasising academic attainment, navigating an environment "that's not built for the way young people think":

> There is definitely a lot of pressure/focus on attainment, both between teachers and students and also, competitively, between students (Catherine, Special education needs co-ordinator).

Theme 2: Staff-Specific Barriers to Supporting Neurodivergent Students

This theme highlights staff-specific barriers to supporting the emotional experiences of neurodivergent students and reducing the emotional burden they experience in school. This includes two sub-themes (i) staff wellbeing; and (ii) inconsistent understandings of, and support for, neurodivergent students. Although staff wellbeing was not the primary focus of this study, this was identified as an important factor that could influence how staff interacted with and supported neurodivergent students.

Sub-Theme 1: Staff Wellbeing

This sub-theme is specific to school staff. Staff described a "tsunami of feelings" ranging from positive emotions, such as enjoying students' energy, curiosity and creativity—to negative feelings, including feeling overwhelmed, anxious, emotionally drained, helpless, frustrated and/or guilty about not doing enough to help neurodivergent students. This sometimes resulted in them not sleeping well or not being able to balance emotions or regulate themselves.

> The biggest thing I find is when I'm getting a lot of emotions, I can't make decisions and I'm constantly asked to make decisions in my job…Then I begin to feel more and more stressed and... then I might cry... (Rosie, Family support manager)

Staff had many responsibilities with school days being "so busy and hectic" to the point that it was sometimes difficult to provide one-to-one support even to those students who were entitled to this:

> I've got from eight until like two without any breaks… I haven't been able to stop even for five minutes. I'm not handling myself as well…I kinda fail in having… the best interaction. (Anna, Teacher)

Importantly, staff were mirroring feelings students reported, being overwhelmed, anxious, frustrated and helpless, experiencing a sense of injustice and unfairness or hiding their feelings:

> Workload, resources, behaviour of students, sleeping and school ethos. A lot of them are things that you're used to and that you can't easily change…In a way, we've all become used to feeling the same way. You don't have the ability to alter all these things. (Arthur, Higher level teaching assistant)

Staff recognised the importance of staying self-regulated when confronted with upsetting situations in school, which at times came at a significant cost to both their own wellbeing and that of students. Their emotional states sometimes impacted the ways they interact with students:

> …When I'm not as regulated or calm, you tend to be …kind of snappy and react without really thinking through… I'm not leaving myself as open to engage in those interactions (with students) … (Catherine, Special education needs co-ordinator)

Sub-Theme 2: Inconsistent Understandings of, and Support for, Neurodivergent Students

Participating staff were interested in, and knowledgeable about, neurodivergence, however, they did not always appear to be the case with their colleagues. Staff did not fully agree on how to work with autistic and ADHD students; some were not very sympathetic regarding students' emotions and others did not know how to support these students:

> It was really difficult to bear…some of the suggestions that are made (by other teachers about the neurodivergent student)…There's a real lack of understanding about what is needed. (Amelia, School project manager)

Staff reported struggling to balance personalised accommodations, rather than following a manualised approach, for instance, when a neurodivergent student "wanted to tell (them) a lot about their interests":

> We allow accommodations, as we should, and we do have children who don't have to be in their blazer, and various things but the problem that we've always met

> is how the other children react to this. (Sophia, Mental health lead)

Inconsistencies in staff views on how to interpret and respond to student behaviours sometimes led to the escalation of difficulties. Staff attributed this variance in approaches to staff's limited knowledge, training and experience or some staff's unwillingness to support neurodivergent students, which led to them "pushing responsibility" onto other colleagues. They identified a lack of staff training, as well as the staff's limited understanding of the emotional experiences of Autistic and/or ADHD students and how to support them.

> (There is) a lack of knowledge and willingness to be curious about what is behind a behaviour or response. (School staff, Anonymised quote from Padlet).

Theme 3: Promoting Emotionally Healthy School Environments

This theme reports the most helpful strategies for improving the emotional experiences of students, primarily, but also staff as identified by neurodivergent students and staff. This includes four subthemes: (i) need for whole school collaboration and action (shared by students and staff); (ii) positive approaches and student agency (shared by students and staff); (iii) building trust, understanding and belonging (shared by students and staff); (iv) close staff relationships, training and supervision (shared by staff).

Sub-Theme 1: Need for Whole School Collaboration and Action

This sub-theme was present in both staff and student groups. Whole school action and collaboration were seen as essential for fostering an emotionally healthy school environment. This involved three elements: the values guiding action, the actions themselves and the shared goals. Staff and neurodivergent students' views were considered important for shaping inclusive policies. While staff mentioned mechanisms like "student steering groups", surveys and focus groups to gather student input, no specific methods for capturing staff perspectives were noted. It also remained unclear how these inputs were used to support staff and student wellbeing:

Staff recognised "the importance of *everybody* making those adjustments and (it)…coming from a place of understanding" to promote consistent acceptance and provide accommodations for all. Whole school systems were important in enabling information sharing about students' emotions, issues, special interests and useful strategies to support them with all staff to enable a culture where everyone shares responsibility for individual students "rather than this being piled onto one or two specialists":

> It's also the shared responsibility…how you foster that kind of collective responsibility. These children might have additional needs, but their wellbeing is the responsibility of everyone, not just the SEND department because of these additional needs. (Catherine, Special education needs co-ordinator)

Both staff and students were quite critical of current inflexible school behaviour policies (e.g., around 'uniform adjustments) and expressed their need for policies that clearly consider different needs and types of support:

> A formal policy against Autism discrimination in school (that) students and teachers are aware of (is needed). (Jude, Autistic student, age 16)

Practices embedded within the existing staff workload, such as enabling staff with a pastoral role (e.g. Heads of Year) to work effectively with students, were considered desirable:

> I think it's building capacity within current resources because they're very limited. It's thinking about how we can help to develop and build expertise and understanding. (Beatrice, Education consultant)

Sub-Theme 2: Positive Approaches and Agency

Both students and staff strongly advocated for approaches that promoted positive talk, guidance and acknowledgement of both positive and negative emotions, as well as for safe, empathic and non-judgmental environments. Staff spoke about the importance of embracing positive language, focusing on "positive behaviours", avoiding using words such as "meltdown' and framing "challenging" behaviour as a sign of distress moving away from "stereotypes":

> I think we have to be very careful about the language, you know, when teachers say 'Oh, well, they're just having a bit of a tantrum'. It's like it's not a tantrum. They're not choosing to go off on one, you know. (Amelia, School project manager)

Staff spoke of adapting work in the classroom to fit the student as much as possible, for example, leveraging students' interests or making lessons more motivating. "Giving students time to work at their own pace and having the time to refocus and de-stress" was a low-maintenance but effective adaptation.

Students valued positive and constructive feedback on their work as well as "having help when needed and not being patronised for not understanding something". Staff could leverage students' hobbies and personal choices to make lessons more engaging lessons:

> …This teacher that we really enjoyed …did not punish us for being ourselves and would encourage us being a bit silly, but would also put pressure on us to actually finish work. (Harry, Autistic + ADHD student, age 16)

Both staff and students valued access to various strategies for managing emotional escalation, such as distraction or safe, calm spaces. Strategies like using "fidget toys", "leaving the room to go to a quieter place or walking away", or accessing quiet spaces often required staff approval and were limited by school policies:

> Make a place/room where neurodiverse people can have fidget toys or different activities, calming and creative, if they're feeling overwhelmed and overstimulated. (Student, Anonymised quote from Jamboard)

Sub-Theme 3: Building Trust, Understanding and Belonging

Staff acknowledged often relying on simplistic "stereotypes" about Autism and ADHD, which they recognised as unhelpful. They stressed the risks of a one-size-fits-all approach and emphasised the need for time to build empathy and understand students' experiences.

Students valued staff who "got them", who understood their learning needs, their emotional pressures and self-regulation needs and validated students' emotional experiences or preferences (sitting, alone time and fidget toys):

> If they're talking to me, I can stare off into space, but they'll get that I'm still listening. Them knowing that I am more easily distracted than other people and I think/work differently. (Student, Anonymised quote from Jamboard)

Staff valued having open discussions in the classroom on individual differences to promote acceptance and offering opportunities for all students, neurotypical and neurodivergent, to interact with each other, such as school clubs, rather than specific social skills training:

> Having a shared hobby between neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent students together in the same rooms is quite a nice thing…you're building those friendships. (Arthur, Higher level teaching assistant)

Staff also emphasised the need for affirming relationships, which required "taking the time to listen" and taking into account self-regulation preferences, even perhaps just for a short check-in and staff being "open and willing to be curious to look behind behaviours".

Students appreciated staff who reassured them that they were not the only ones experiencing strong emotions and valued when staff offered practical, but not intrusive, advice on possible strategies to manage emotions:

> I just want people who help me calm myself down, instead of telling me to calm down…If you help me with breathing techniques…then maybe I could calm down easily. (Helen, Autistic + ADHD student, age 12)

Peer support was equally important for students' emotional wellbeing. As Henry (student, ADHD, age 16) highlighted, it was important to have "friends that match my energy when I get excited":

> Knowing that my friends understand me and they will stand up for me if a teacher is trying to give me a detention for an 'unfair' reason (helps me recover from negative emotions). (Student, anonymised quote from Jamboard)

Students commented on the need for school policies that promote empathy and understanding around differences and replace advice and rules with compassionate action:

> If the teacher makes it seem like less of a 'YOU' problem…The most effective teacher I had, being a neurodivergent teacher, made it seem that it was less of a problem that uniquely concerned me. It was a problem that was quite common and was very solvable… (Jude, student, Autistic, age 16)

Students and staff both commented that students being told to "leave stresses and stuff at the door" and to calm down, rather than being shown how to calm down, were unhelpful and developing training specific to neurodiversity and emotion regulation is key:

> …Some staff probably need to be educated on the basics of how ASD and ADHD present, what they're experiencing in a classroom …We have to really go back to basics in helping staff understand what a diagnosis means… (Amelia, School project manager)

Sub-Theme 4: Close Staff Relationships, Training and Supervision

This sub-theme was specific to the staff's perspectives. Ensuring protected time for staff to reflect on their practices with colleagues and discuss individual students was considered an integral step toward supporting student regulation:

> It's really useful to have, ideally, a regular case time where all staff who interact with that particular student can discuss their strategies and successes…I think communication is always the biggest issue, isn't it? (Sophia, Mental health lead)

Having open spaces to interact with other staff members was also deemed important to building closer relationships with colleagues, addressing any power dynamics ("hierarchy system at school") and nurturing a more positive working environment and allyship across different disciplines (see Fig. 3).

> I feel there is a hierarchy system at school. So, you don't feel like you can speak to them (senior leadership teams) as openly about your concerns. (It is important that) you have a positive environment where you feel like you can speak to anybody without thinking twice. (Arya, Learning support assistant)

Similarly, staff suggested training opportunities that are experiential and interactive with opportunities to record their voices, use interactive platforms "like Mentimeter" and learn from each other. They found that our sessions where they heard audio recordings of young people's accounts of their experience were "a really powerful way of getting (things) across":

> It should be more about us getting to know (the neurodivergent student) why they are responding in the way that they're responding or behaving in the way that they are. (Anika, Head of year)

When properly curated, sharing young people's experiences in this way deepened the staff's understanding and empathy. It also provoked lively, fruitful discussion and sharing of experiences and solutions:

> It's very powerful to hear a person explaining how they're feeling. I think that partly due to lack of resources, lack of information, there's a lot of 'Oh, they're acting out, everybody's got ADHD these days'. To actually hear it firsthand, as that cuts through those assumptions or prejudices. (Charlotte, School counsellor)

Staff emphasised the need for "shifting that thinking" to see students' emotions potentially as a response to the school environment:

> Actually, a young person is in distress… it's just shifting that thinking. So, it's about not trying to change through intervention with the young person, what

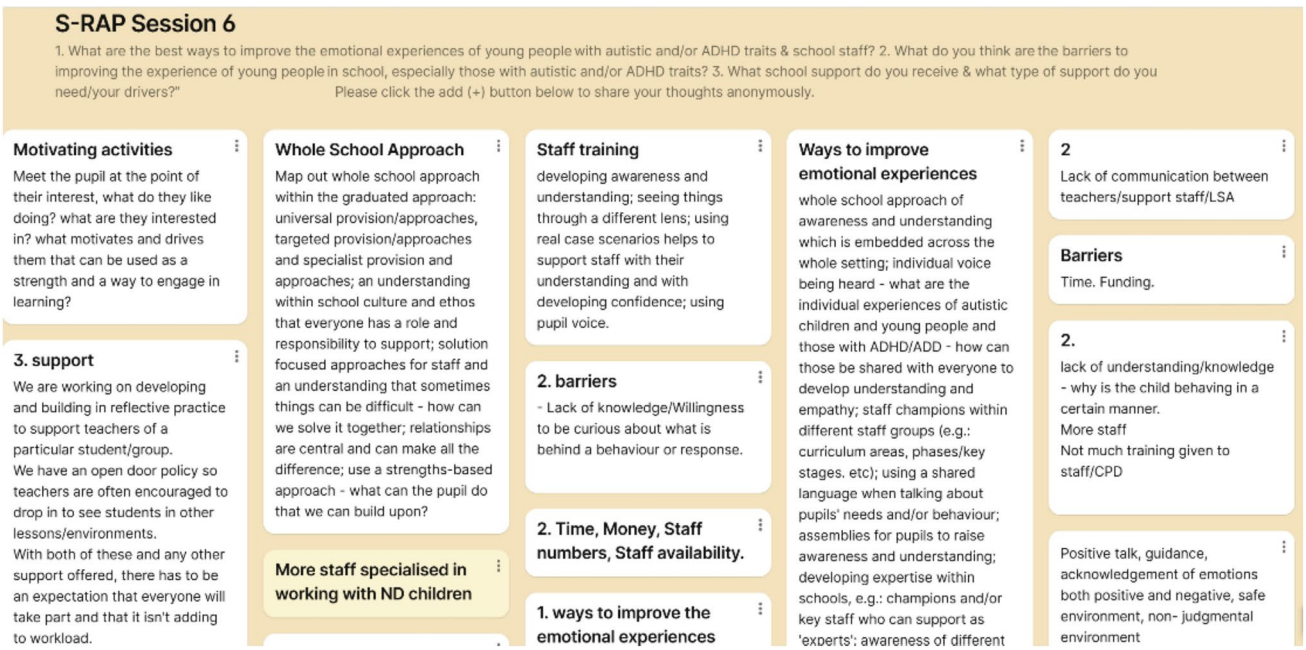


Fig. 3 Padlet notes from a staff focus group

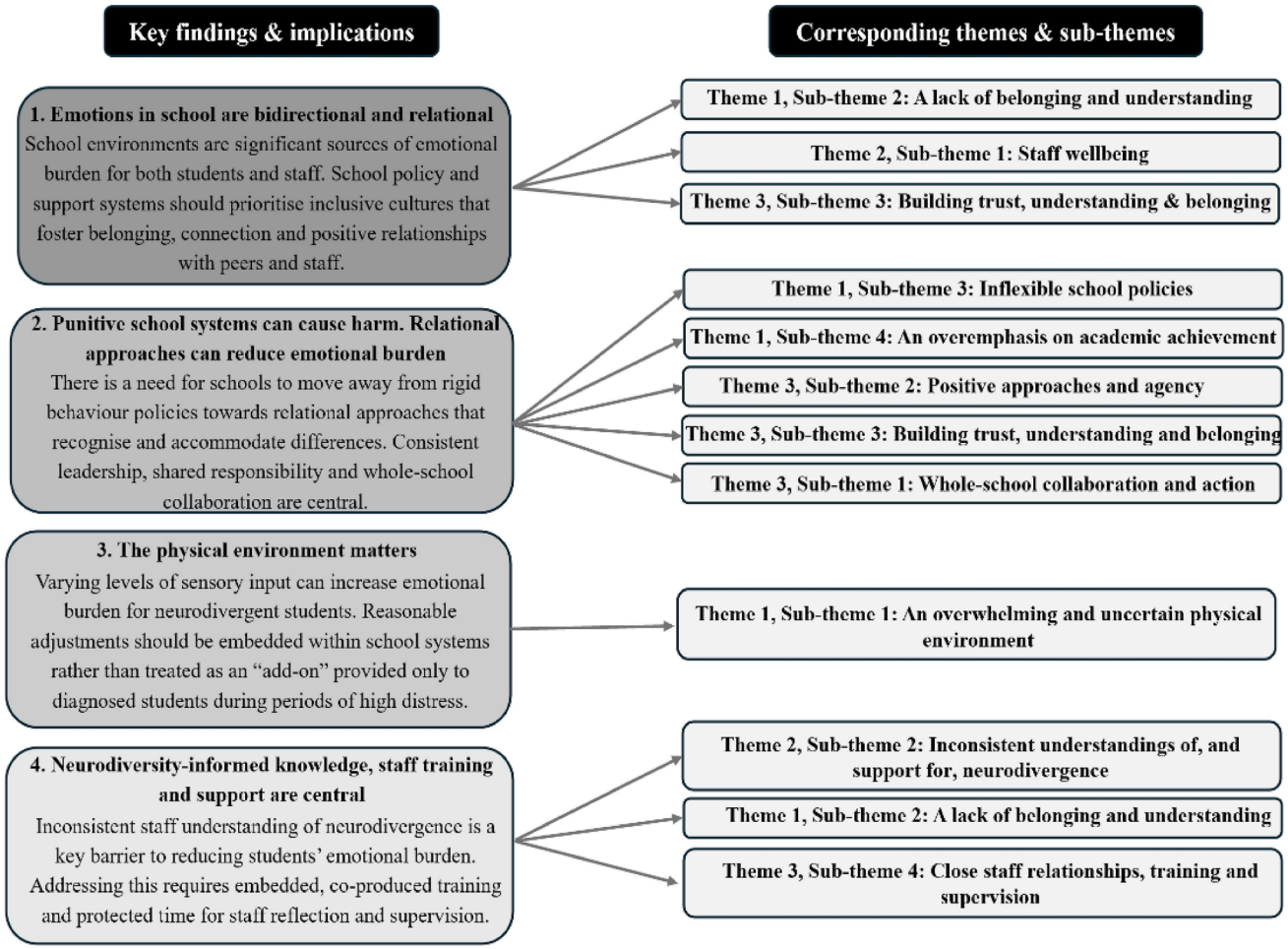


Fig. 4 Key findings, implications and corresponding themes and sub-themes

> they're doing, but it's about how we're responding, so that being reflected in policy and practice. (Beatrice, Education consultant)

Staff with pastoral responsibilities had to deal with difficult issues regarding staff or student wellbeing, often without supervision. Having spaces to reflect on teaching practice and connect with colleagues was important:

> What really helps me is finding out that other teachers struggle with certain situations or students and having that safe space over coffee. It's just so incredibly helpful to know that other teachers also struggle with that same thing or struggle with the same emotion… That kind of collaborative sharing of your struggle definitely helps me. (Maeve, Head of the year)

Similarly, some staff commented that they appreciated hearing other staff's experiences, ideas and strategies in our focus groups.

Discussion

This study explored the role of school environments in creating emotional burden for neurodivergent youth and the ways schools can adapt to reduce it. Neurodivergent students and staff identified negative school experiences as key contributors to distress for Autistic and ADHD students (Theme 1), echoing research on school-based stressors (Lukito et al., 2025; Russell et al., 2023). Staff reflected on specific barriers that they encountered when supporting neurodivergent students (Theme 2). Both groups also highlighted powerful supportive elements within schools (Theme 3). Figure 4 outlines key findings and implications alongside the corresponding themes and sub-themes.

First, our findings reveal that school environments can negatively affect the emotional well-being, or alternatively be a source of support, for both neurodivergent students and staff, perspectives usually examined separately. Students described isolation, misunderstanding and the absence of an inclusive community (Theme 1, Sub-theme 2). Staff reported feeling emotionally depleted and unsupported

when trying to meet neurodivergent students' needs (Theme 2, Sub-theme 1). Although the primary focus of this study was student emotional burden, staff emotional burden also appeared to play a central role in how staff supported these students. Students and staff also reported the value of good student–teacher interactions and of supportive friends (Theme 3, Sub-theme 3). These shared experiences underline the bidirectional nature of emotions in schools. Current interventions often frame emotion regulation as the responsibility of the neurodivergent young person, emphasising compliance with school norms. Our findings highlight the need for policy and practice to recognise the relational and environmental context shaping emotions for both groups. There is a need for schools to move beyond surface-level inclusivity towards actively cultivating cultures of belonging, where connection and positive, trusting relationships with peers and staff are prioritised as central to emotional wellbeing.

Second, both groups emphasised the danger of inflexible behaviour policies and academic pressures, including zero-tolerance approaches and narrow definitions of success (Theme 1, Sub-themes 3–4). Detentions and punitive responses to stress-related behaviours were not uncommon, aligning with critiques of UK behaviour systems (Department for Education, 2018, 2022, 2024). Students and staff described feeling powerless within these rigid structures (MacLean et al., 2023; Ohan et al., 2011) and called for environments that prioritise co-regulation, connection, positive approaches and student agency (Theme 3, Sub-theme 2). A relational approach to mental health (Theme 3, Sub-theme 3), centred on positive student–staff and peer relationships, aligns with NICE guidance (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2022a, 2022b) and evidence that school connectedness protects mental health and reduces suicidality (Carroll & Hurry, 2018; Rose et al., 2024). Such practices are feasible within existing resources but require consistent leadership and whole-school coordination (Theme 3, Sub-theme 1).

Third, the physical environment emerged as an overlooked but influential factor (Theme 1, Sub-theme 1). Sensory overstimulation is well documented (Fielding et al., 2025), yet schools often rely on removing distressed students rather than adapting environments. Staff advocated quiet areas, sensory tools and soothing activities (McKinlay et al., 2025). Students confirmed how useful these breathers could be, but also how inconsistently applied. Consistent with neurodiversity-informed approaches, such adjustments should be embedded across school systems, not provided only to diagnosed students (Aitken & Fletcher-Watson, 2022).

Fourth, staff primarily reported inconsistent teacher understanding of Autism and ADHD (Theme 2, Sub-theme 2). Staff requested neurodiversity-informed training and standardised interventions aligned with inclusive principles (Ballantyne et al., 2024). Students described frequent misinterpretations of behaviours (Theme 1, Sub-theme 2) such as inattention or emotional dysregulation, reflecting the "double empathy problem" (Milton, 2012). Continuous, embedded professional development, co-produced with neurodivergent young people, can shift staff attitudes, strengthen relationships and support cultural change (Goldberg, 2019). Staff also valued protected time for supervision and collaborative reflection (Theme 3, Sub-theme 4), which can improve wellbeing and consistency (Frosch et al., 2018; Hurry & Russell, 2022).

Strengths and Limitations

This study is novel in gathering the perspectives of both neurodivergent students and staff over time, using applied theatre and multimedia methods to support diverse communication and exploring staff emotional wellbeing alongside students'. Listening to each other, as facilitated by applied-theatre techniques, offers opportunities for students and staff to think together about sources of emotional burden from different angles and co-produce more targeted solutions to reduce and manage it.

Limitations include self-selection bias, small student and staff samples, limited scope for comparison by diagnosis, and the fact that participants were drawn from different schools, which does not allow direct comparison of perspectives within the same school context. As such, the findings may overrepresent the views of staff and students with a particular interest in, or strong experiences of, school-related emotional burden. The small and diverse sample also limits the extent to which differences between diagnostic groups or staff with different school roles could be explored in depth, and it cannot fully represent the broader emotional experiences of students and staff across different school settings. Most students and staff attended all or the majority of the focus groups (see Tables 1 and 2). Additionally, conducting four to six focus groups per group is generally considered sufficient to generate rich data (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Additional factors, such as cultural differences, school geographical location, and schools' socioeconomic status, may also play a key role in shaping approaches to promoting emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, as the study focused on mainstream secondary school settings (mostly public), the findings may not be transferable to special education contexts or to students with higher support needs, including learning-disabled young people or those with more significant mental health needs.

Nonetheless, findings align with prior work showing the central role of school environments in shaping neurodivergent students' emotions. Neurodivergent students and staff agreed that school environments profoundly impact their wellbeing. Creating emotionally attuned mainstream schools requires coordinated action across culture, training, physical environments and policy, informed by lived experience and co-designed approaches.

Conclusion

Neurodivergent students and school staff recognised that the school environment affects the wellbeing of both groups. Our findings point to ways mainstream schools can become more attuned to neurodivergent youth, reducing emotional burdens and potentially improving outcomes for all students. This requires coordinated action across school culture, staff training, physical environments and policy. Future research should test these findings on a wider scale, examining co-designed approaches to environmental adaptation and models of supervision and training that integrate current evidence and lived experience to support the wellbeing of both young people and school staff.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors of this paper have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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