
How To Be Human

Process (interactions and relationships)

Social interactions have played a significant role in shaping the professional growth of my participants. Supportive and understanding colleagues have been instrumental in fostering this development, providing a sense of inclusion and stability. Conversely, a lack of understanding and unclear expectations have created challenges and barriers, impacting their ability to navigate their professional environments effectively.

“Sort of how my mind worked. Kind of. So, she knew the things that I would worry about most and how important it was for me to worry about it and things like that. So yeah, she knew me *really well.”* Robyn

As long as I knew exactly what they wanted from me, I just *got on with it.”* Alex

Process

‘My mentor expected me to be a certain *way and didn’t have empathy for why I* found some things difficult. They kept comparing me to the last trainee who they *said did it better,’* Robyn

‘I got to know people without having to have sort of have individual conversations with them I can just kind of observe their conversations and slowly start to include myself in them when I got more comfortable and things like that but at the *pace that's right.’* Robyn

‘We had a fantastic relationship, I got on really, really well with her. Everything was comfortable, everything was easy. She got me.’ Alex

Person (Individual Characteristics and Agency)

My participants have many strengths that they bring to their professional roles, e.g. high work ethic, high expectations of themselves, creativity and special interests and self-understanding. These strengths have shaped how they engage in their work as teachers and navigate their working environments.

I have a real block with sort of asking for help, asking for support. I think I've just got used to just getting on with things and just doing things *by myself really.'* Alex

'your brain is working in two halves. this part is working to be normal to try and make sure you don't say the wrong *things […] the other half is* working on you being you, *and it's incredibly tiring* situation to be in physically and mentally and more so *mentally I think.'* Stephen

Person

μmean I suppose, people talk about stimming, don't they with autism. And I think, you know, the gymnastics in a way and all of that was probably part of my way of sort of regulating and feeling more regulated or dealing with, you know, all the sort of *overwhelm and everything.'* Alex

'Because I am too much of a perfectionist and too much wanting to achieve. You spend more time doing school stuff then perhaps you need to, but you feel that if you don't you don't feel *you done a good enough job.'* Stephen

'Yes, I'm very good at the next steps of something so very good at putting something into sort of a logical order. So, and I think that helps with a lot of things. I'm very good at de-escalation with students as well. So, because I don't get very angry, and my emotions pretty much can stay very level that helps a lot. So, I tend to be given more difficult classes *because I'm very patient with them.'* Robyn

Context (Systemic and Environmental Factors

The make-up of physical spaces is a V L J Q L I L F D Q W I D F W R U L Q I O X development. The school setting, expectations for academic success and workplace culture influence their sense of belonging and ability to thrive.

‘It was somewhere that almost drew you back because it was somewhere that you been successful, somewhere that was non-threatening. And the thought of going out there and having to reintroduce yourself to a whole workplace environment you are not familiar with at all. There was a comfort to going back into an environment in which you've been successful *in.’* Stephen

Context

‘But then it's an even bigger department and it just kind of made the issue worse. So that's when I realised that's what the issue was. It was so big, and everything was so isolated. Yeah, and that I really didn't enjoy that I wasn't able to make *relationships with anybody.’* Robyn

‘I’d say the best thing about schools for me is their routine. Because other jobs don't have the same routine. I have a timetable for the *entire year. It’s great. And they stole my* timetable.’ Nick

‘So, if you say something to me and it gets my brain starting to think and we're already engaging with the first thing you said to me and it blocks out anything else, which means I might totally misunderstand the question or there's a subsequent part of the question that *I've not even recorded’.* Stephen

Time (Career Transitions and Personal Growth

0 \ S D U W L F L S D Q W V ¶ V W R U L H balance between enjoyment in their professional lives and exhaustion due to burnout. Feeling a sense of control in their personal and professional lives has been important for their development over time.

µdon't think I'd have lasted beyond 13 years. *No way.'* Alex

'I wanted to prove to myself I could, because I had got to the point where I felt so comfortable that I didn't feel like I could go anywhere else, which then put me in a difficult position. If anything went wrong for whatever reason, or I had to move somewhere or something *like that.'* Robyn

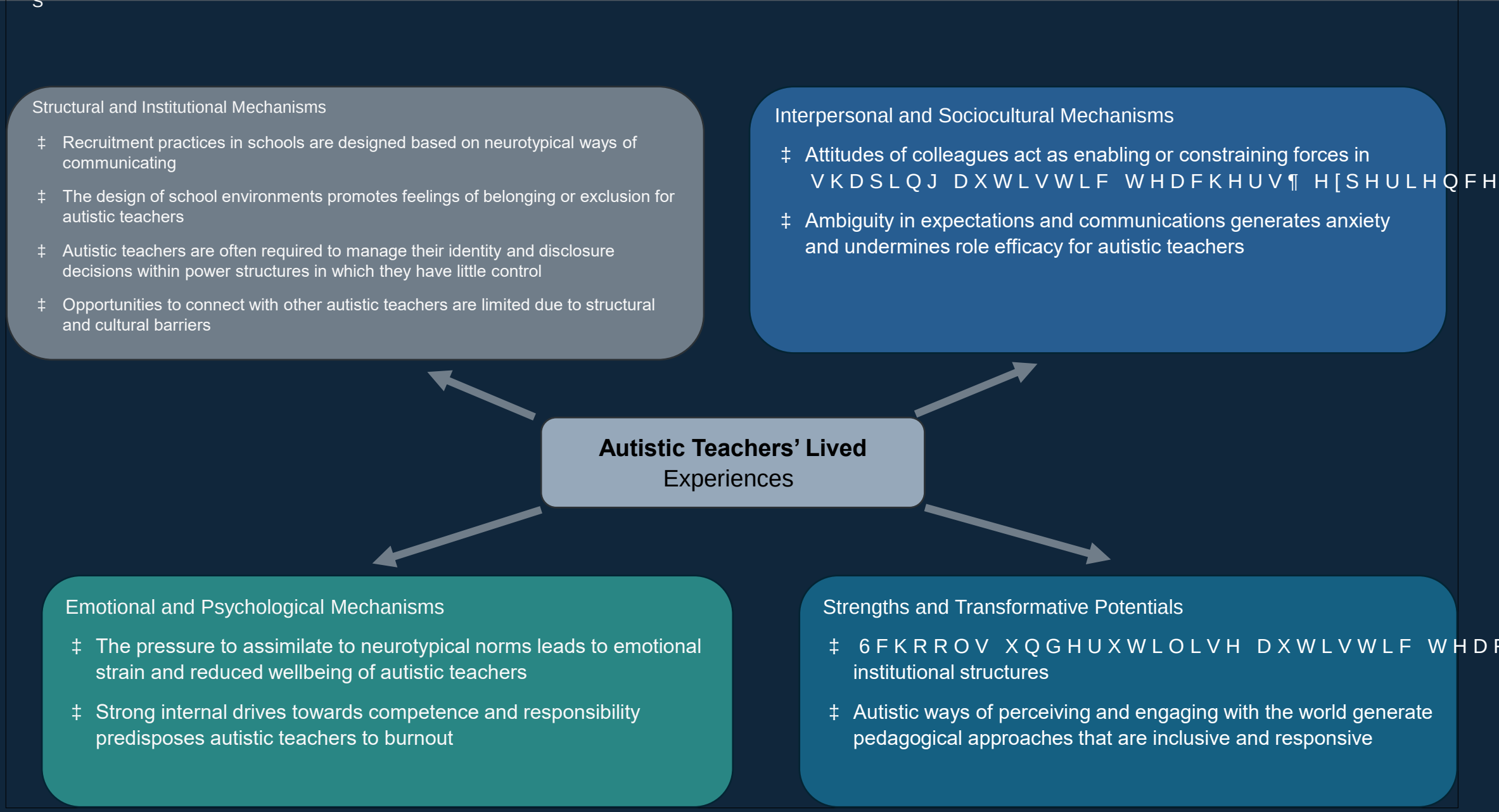
Time

‘I enjoy teaching too much. Higher roles mean less structure, and I prefer the predictability of teaching the *same lessons every day.’*

Robyn

‘But the problem then is you've got a variety of behaviours in front of you, and you don't necessarily always select the right ones and because it's not your behaviour it can come across quite in artificial and inappropriate at times because you're trying to do something, but you're not. It's not *really you, if that makes sense.’*

Stephen


Structural and Institutional Mechanisms
‡ Recruitment practices in schools are designed based on neurotypical ways of communicating
‡ The design of school environments promotes feelings of belonging or exclusion for autistic teachers
‡ Autistic teachers are often required to manage their identity and disclosure decisions within power structures in which they have little control
‡ Opportunities to connect with other autistic teachers are limited due to structural and cultural barriers
Interpersonal and Sociocultural Mechanisms
‡ Attitudes of colleagues act as enabling or constraining forces in
‡ Ambiguity in expectations and communications generates anxiety and undermines role efficacy for autistic teachers
Autistic Teachers' Lived Experiences
Emotional and Psychological Mechanisms
‡ The pressure to assimilate to neurotypical norms leads to emotional strain and reduced wellbeing of autistic teachers
‡ Strong internal drives towards competence and responsibility predisposes autistic teachers to burnout
Strengths and Transformative Potentials
‡ institutional structures
‡ Autistic ways of perceiving and engaging with the world generate pedagogical approaches that are inclusive and responsive

Barriers faced by autistic teachers



Recruitment

- Ambiguous questions and socially demanding interviews disadvantage autistic teachers.
- Teaching unknown classes in unfamiliar environments presents greater challenges for autistic teachers.
- Lack of clear and structured information about the interview process adds to stress and anxiety.

'Because I've had sort of interviews and jobs in the past, but I know exactly what that *process was……they'd tell me that it was the interview and then this or this…..but for teaching, you don't know until the day….For* some places they say that you've got this period of time where you'll be doing your interviews and there's a period of time where you'll be doing a task and in this period of time where you'll be doing your lesson at some point. But none of the lessons that they said would happen happened at the time that they *said that they were happening…..'* Robyn

Environment

- Large and sprawling settings pose challenges in establishing meaningful relationships
- Sensory overload from busy, noisy and open plan spaces contributes to stress and exhaustion
- Importance of own space to avoid sensory overload

‘But then it's an even bigger department and it just kind of made the issue worse. So that's when I realised that's what the issue was. It was so big, and everything was so isolated. Yeah, and that I really didn't enjoy that I wasn't able to make *relationships with anybody.’* Robyn

Disclosure and masking

- Internalised stigma associated with autism
- Deficit framed discourses about autism in education
- 6RFLHWDO SHUFHSWLRQV RI DµJRRG¶ teacher
- Control over disclosure process
- 3UHVVXUH WR DSSHDU µQRUPDO¶ reduces wellbeing

µ…kind of felt like it would almost make people *look at me in a certain way if they knew'.* Robyn

µ…well no one had made any for like the last 20 *years. I don't think they would start now'.* Nick

µ…I think my masking is probably far more energy consuming than perhaps it is for somebody else, and I think that's the thing I am conscious of and I've become more conscious of it. It's the energy I put into masking; I never appreciated how much energy goes in to trying to be normal ¶ Stephen

Professional relationships

- Colleagues' attitudes can have positive and negative impacts
- Importance of relationships in professional lives
- Socialising is an important part of belonging
- A lack of understanding of autism can lead to communication challenges
- Lack of opportunity to connect with other autistic teachers

> And one to one is never a problem and small groups are not a problem. It's big group, I think. I will avoid big you know big social events because I know that it will take me a long time to recover from and it's just not worth it the price I'll pay for it. It's just, you know, I can get through it at the time, and it'll be fine at the time. It's the aftermath that I know I'll have to deal with. ¶Alex

Communications

- Lack of clarity about expectations leads to stress and anxiety
- Importance of understanding autistic tendency towards directness and literal interpretation
- Unpredictability presents greater challenges for autistic teachers

and they are going, you just need to think about improving your behaviour management more, all while I am working as much as I possibly can. We just need to work a bit more! So, I was like, right you're out now. I'll not listen to you. Their advice just wasn't helpful. ¶Nick

so *they'd say they were implementing* this thing, but then what they were actually looking for was something *different or it wasn't quite what they meant…. I got told a few times that I took things too literally'*. Robyn

Burnout

- Autistic teachers have a high work ethic
- $ X W L V W L F W H D F K H U V
- their role
- Importance of getting things right and completing their work to a high standard
- Hobbies and creative interests are important for relaxation

I've got to get it right but also that sometimes that sense of not being able to let go of some things and having to see things through. ¶

I love work. I love being busy, I can't not be busy. ¶ Stephen

G H G L F D W L R Q W R

And I think, you know, the gymnastics in a way and all of that was probably part of my way of sort of regulating and feeling more regulated or dealing with, you know, all the *sort of overwhelm and everything.'* Alex

'You know, if I don't work in the evening, I feel guilty. I feel I'm not doing my job and there's always something I feel I should be doing and that I think is very much a consequence of the condition. But it's just what I have grown up through in my teaching career and that has *had implications when I had a younger family.'*

Stephen

Expertise and agency

- Empathy and understanding of challenges faced by autistic learners
- Role models to challenges deficit narratives about autism
- Thrive in areas of expertise and interests
- Contribute to schools through mentoring, extracurricular activities, curriculum development
- Desire for intellectual challenge
- Limited opportunities for career progression
- Importance of control in professional lives

'I know there were lots of things I sort of did that were new and you know, I know wouldn't have happened if I hadn't had been the one doing them sort of thing, you know. Getting authors in and you know having theme days and doing sort of exciting *stuff. Yeah, which I really enjoyed doing.'* Alex

it's the skills we are not good at that can sometimes take more importance…we are becoming much more people orientated and that is *a bigger challenge'.* Stephen

As an example, when they say it to you in terms of I can't do this because I am autistic. So am I. It's useful that you learn to do this, because I've learned to do it and it is useful for me Nick

Research Question:
What structural, cultural, and institutional mechanisms shape the lived experiences of autistic teachers in educational settings?



How do autistic W H D F K H U V ¶ S H U V R Q D O histories, including their own schooling, shape their values, motivations and professional identities?

Early family and school experiences show how features such as perfectionist tendencies, masking and resilience developed over time and contributed to teacher identities. Past feelings of exclusion also shape pedagogical approaches to inclusion. The importance of having control of professional growth developed over time.

Research Question:
What structural, cultural, and institutional mechanisms shape the lived experiences of autistic teachers in educational settings?

2

How do key stages in D X W L V W L F W H D F K H U ' professional development, such as training and early career, reflect broader structural and cultural influences?

Experiences of teacher training, placements, job interviews and institutional practices exposed systemic barriers to inclusion. Structural and cultural mechanisms limit the capacity for control in professional lives.

Research Question:
What structural, cultural, and institutional mechanisms shape the lived experiences of autistic teachers in educational settings?

3

How do autistic teachers navigate and respond to the social, sensory, and organisational demands of their professional roles?

Participants developed strategies (such as masking, withdrawal, use of safe spaces) to help them cope with the sensory overload and social pressures of school environments that are not designed with their needs in mind. Working within such environments can have a negative impact on health and wellbeing.

Research Question:
What structural, cultural, and institutional mechanisms shape the lived experiences of autistic teachers in educational settings?

4

What conditions and mechanisms enable or constrain the professional growth, inclusion, and wellbeing of autistic teachers?

Having agency in their professional lives enables autistic teachers to apply their strengths to their work. Supportive colleagues are essential enablers of this agency. Professional identities are constrained by rigid systems and normative expectations. A lack of networking opportunities can further constrain professional development.

Implications of findings

Gaining employment

Recruitment practices should consider the needs of autistic individuals

Inclusion by design

Educational spaces should be designed with autistic teachers' needs in mind. Adjustments should be made to reduce sensory overload. Communications should be clear and unambiguous

Training for staff

Staff training should draw on the lived experiences of autistic teachers. Topics might include communication preferences, sensory differences, identity-first language and the diversity of autistic experiences.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing frameworks should reflect the unique stressors autistic teachers face

Opportunities for connection

Spaces should be provided to enable autistic teachers to make connections with each other and establish epistemic communities.

Transformative Potential

Schools should better utilise the strengths autistic teachers bring to their professional lives. They should be afforded opportunities to shape curriculum and pedagogies drawing on their unique insights. There should be leadership opportunities that play to their strengths.

Better visibility in education



Questions and Discussion

How can we better support autistic teachers in our own institutions?

How can we promote change within our own partnerships?



Final Reflections

Value of Autistic Teachers

Autistic teachers are vital yet underrecognized contributors in education, offering unique perspectives and skills.

Systemic Barriers to Inclusion

Systemic obstacles hinder genuine inclusion, requiring institutional changes to support autistic educators effectively.

Shifting Adaptation Responsibility

Adaptation burden should move from individuals to systems, fostering supportive environments celebrating neurodiversity.

Revising Perceptions of Autism

Reevaluating societal and institutional views on autism is crucial to embrace autistic voices and identities fully.

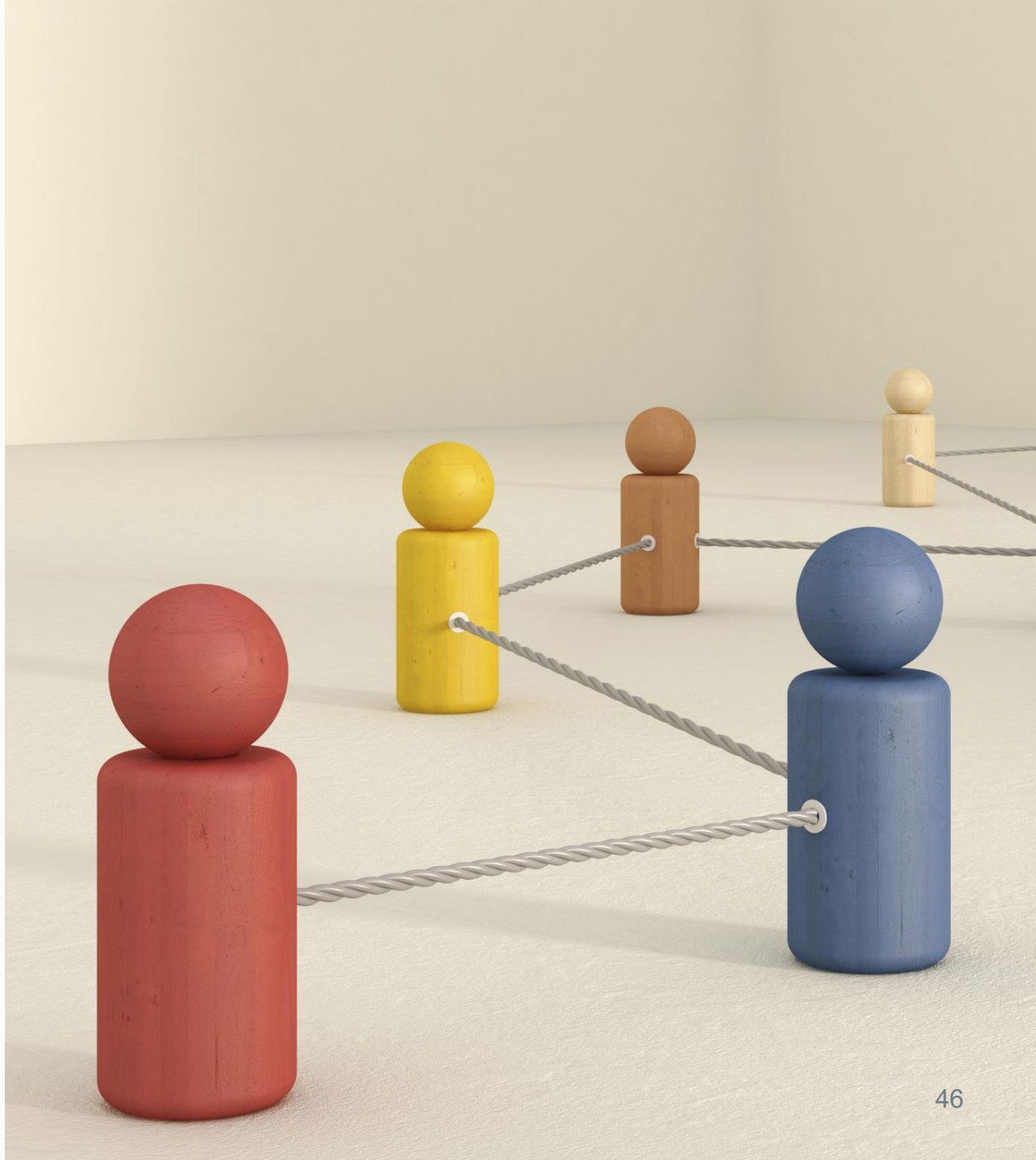


µ - X V W O L N H I U H V K D L U E H Q H I
environments that welcome human cognitive and emotional differences ±including the acute sensitivity to the world associated with many forms of neurodivergence ±benefit all. Creating organisations where canaries can thrive, create and innovate also means
F U H D W L Q J K H D O W K L H U V W U F
(Praslova, 2024, p. 2)



Further Research

- Comparative studies across international contexts
- Studies in different educational contexts e.g. alternative provision
- Longitudinal studies from ITE through to career progression and leadership
- Intersectionality studies exploring additional layers of marginalisation related to race, gender, sexuality and other aspects of identity



Thank you

Any questions?

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