DOI: https://doi.org/10.63056/jllsa.2.9.2026.377

Journal of Language, Literature & Social Affairs

journal homepage: https://scholarclub.org/index.php/jllsa

A Multiple-Case Study of Self-Identity in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Huma Ijaz[*a] **, Dr. Hafiz Tahir Jameel** [b]

a. Department of Special Education, Faculty of Education, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
b. Assistant Professor, Department of Special Education, Faculty of Education, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

ARTICLE INFO

Received:
August 08, 2026
Revision Received:
August 28, 2026
Accepted:
September 11, 2026
Available Online:
September 27, 2026

Keywords:
Autism spectrum disorder, Self-identity, Autistic identity, Symbolic interactionism, Neurodiversity, Sensory sensitivity, Special interests, Qualitative multiple case study

ABSTRACT

Studies of children's emerging self-representations have begun to abandon deficit models even though most research continues to draw inferences about children's sense of self from their verbal self-reports or adults' interpretations. The aim of this study was to explore the ways in which children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) talked and negotiated self-identity through social interaction, sensory experience, preferences and interests, and creative modalities in naturalistic environments.This was done with six school age children with ASD in Lahore, Pakistan using a qualitative multiple case study approach. Individual child was the unit of analysis. Data included naturalistic observations, field notes, short video recordings, activities focusing on the child, such as drawing, collaging, writing, typing, music, sorting, clay work and semi-structured parent interviews. Case matrices, in-vivo, first cycle descriptive coding, analytic jottings, theme consolidation, cross-source comparison, second cycle pattern/axial coding and cross-case synthesis were used to analyze the data within and across case. There were two main lenses, Symbolic Interactionism and Dialogical Self Theory, and a neurodiversity-affirming lens.Five cross case themes emerged: (1) Style of Social Interaction not Deficit; (2) Family as a Relational Foundation for Self-Identity; (3) Sensory Sensitivity influencing Self-Identity; (4) Special Interests as Spaces for Expression; and (5) Identity formation as a contextual process. In all cases, identity was most vivid when children could communicate in their preferred ways and when they were engaged in relational and sensory supportive environments that were predictable. For some children writing and typing was a way to express wishes and preferences which were not as clearly expressed verbally, and for others, drawing, collage, clay, movement and sensory activities gave another way to express themselves. There was an awareness of participation rather than abdication to the child, with adult mediation.The results indicated that it is important to study the self-identity of the autistic child as a relational and situational process instead of assuming that it is mainly based on the child's social-communication performance. Therefore, opportunities for choice, creative expression, regulation of sensory inputs and interest participation should be increased in the context of educational and therapeutic practice. The study adds to the now emerging literature of qualitative studies on autistic identity from Pakistan, affirming a neurodiversity approach.

[*] Correspondence to: Department of Special Education, Faculty of Education, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
E-*mail address:* humakamran9422@gmail.com (H. Ijaz)

3105-4919 & 3105-4927/© 2026 The Authors. Published by Scholar Club. This is an open access article.

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder defined in diagnostic classifications by social communication and interaction problems and by restricted or repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests or activities (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022). While these are all significant features for diagnosis and planning for support, a deficit-based approach can mask how autistic children feel competent, preferred, in control, related, and belonging. Newer research on neurodiversity has, therefore, prompted researchers to look at autism beyond the label of a set of challenges and consider it as a type of variation in human experience, characterized by unique ways of perceiving, communicating, engaging and making meaning (Kapp et al., 2013; Milton, 2014; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022).

In this change, the issue of identity has grown to be a significant field of autism research. Positive autistic identity was linked with external acceptance and support, and with improved mental health and wellbeing, according to a systematic review performed by Davies et al., (2024). Qualitative research has also demonstrated that such factors as messages in schools, interpersonal relationships, stigma, and accessibility of environment affect autistic people's self-understanding (Williams et al., 2019; Cooper et al., 2023). Recent work on the use of terms, stigma and community with autistic adolescents further shows that identity is complex and that the use of terms, of stigma and of opportunities to understand oneself shape identity (also current qualitative evidence through the autism identity literature).

Literature on identity, however, has been written about adolescents or adults, and has drawn on interview, questionnaire, or retrospective accounts, or participants who, in their own words, have sufficient language to convey their experience. These approaches are useful but could be incomplete for younger children who do not yet have a verbal understanding of themselves, which may be expressed by action, preference, gesture, sensory regulation, objects, creative products, technology, music, familiarity with routine. Not necessarily unable to respond to an abstract question of “who am I?” does a child not naturally respond to a question on his or her own terms, but instead repeatedly chooses a preferred activity, refuses a sensory experience, seeks out a preferred relational pattern, makes a visual depiction of an aspiration, or uses written expression rather than verbal communication to express an important aspect of who he or she is.

This is especially important for special education because eye contact and spontaneous initiation from peers and verbal reciprocity and compliance are often used to assess social competence. These indicators can refer to observable behavior but do not necessarily give the meaning of the behavior to the child. Others, such as Ochs and Solomon (2010), called for the focus on autistic sociality to be taken as a social fact rather than just a lack of it, and embodied approaches to autism highlighted the situated interaction between person and environment (De Jaegher, 2013). Participation, regulation and engagement can also be shaped by sensory experiences (Robertson & Baron-Cohen, 2017) and intense interests are not only ways of regulating behaviour, but they can also be ways to learn, communicate and engage socially (Winter-Messiers, 2007).

The current study was based on multiple-case study that was undertaken in Lahore, Pakistan, to explore the manifestation of self-identity in the context of the daily interaction. The study was based mostly on Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) that sees the self as a product of interaction and interpretation and was fortified by the concept of Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans, 2001) that explains the self as pluralistic and situationally embedded. A neurodiversity affirming perspective was adopted to avoid the misreading of all differences from neurotypical behaviour as evidence of the lack of social or personal meaning.

The main idea that emerged from the six cases was that the self-identity of children diagnosed with autism was not missing because there was either little or no verbal or peer interaction. Instead, it was spread over relationships, senses, favourite activities, creations, actions and context-specific decisions. The question that is being asked in this study is: How did self-identity appear in social interaction, sensory experiences, special interests, and other ways of self-expression of six children with ASD?

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framing

2.1. Self-identities are interactional and contextual processes

Self-identity in this study was defined as a growing awareness of the self as a unique individual in terms of lived experience, relationships, preferences, agency and significance of actions and experiences. The definition is meant to separate the concept of 'self-identity' from the very limited description of 'self' in terms of words. It facilitated the analysis to take in a child's repeated preferences, intentions, communication styles, reactions, relationships and imaginative works as potential sources of evidence of selfhood, where this was backed up by contextual and cross-source evidence.

The major interpretive frame of interpretation was symbolic Interactionism. Mead (1934) theorized that the self was a result of social processes, and Blumer (1969) stressed that people act towards things based on the meanings that things have for them; meanings are a product of social interaction and are interpreted and modified through social interaction. When applied

judiciously to autism, the idea does not include the need to rely on traditional dialogue as the only way to communicate with one another. The meaning of a gesture, written statement, choice of activity, response to a person, use of an object, or recurrent participation pattern is defined in an analytical way as the meaning is established by context, recurrence, and triangulation.

A second layer of interpretation was added by Hermans (2001) with the concept of Dialogical Self Theory (DST) that different positions of the self can be salient across contexts and relationships. All of these presentations can be different in the same child, in a different moment of the class, in a different activity. Instead, they are seen as context-sensitive cases of self-developing self-expression.

Lastly, an ethically and interpretively "affirming" framework for the study was created by a neurodiversity lens. Finally, an ethically and interpretively "affirming" framework for the study was created using a lens of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity scholarship proposes to reject the assumption that autistic difference is a deficit which needs to be normalized (Kapp et al., 2013; Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). Importantly, this attitude must not be confusing with a rejection of any real support needs. Instead, it invites scientists to differentiate a child's problem in a certain setting and what significance or competence might be seen in the adapted setting.

2.2. Research Gap

Important connections have been reported in the literature between identity and acceptance, relationships, school environment, sensory experiences, and autistic strengths, but there is a methodological void regarding the study of children's self-identity when the most powerful mode of expression is not verbal self-report. The study added to the literature by bringing together naturalistic observation and field notes, as well as short video recordings, creative and interest-based activities, and parent interviews of six individual cases. It also provided a Pakistani context where the family relationships and adult mediation were more apparent in children's participation.

This study did not assert that each behaviour that was observed in each child with autism was an identity statement. Where patterns were recurrent, meaningful within context, and supported across data sources, and consistent with the child's preferences, relationships or expressed choices, instead, identity related interpretations were made. This is a very central part of the study's contribution of interpretive caution.

3. Method

3.1. Design

The study design was a multiple case study which was conducted with a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. Unit of analysis was the individual child. Multiple-case study was suitable because the study aimed to achieve a depth of the information in each child's case, to compare across the cases while maintaining case uniqueness (Yin, 2018). The creation also allowed for an examination of contextual conditions and not the separation of self-expression from the social and sensory context of which it was a part.

3.2. Participants and setting

The children included in the study were six with clinically diagnosed ASD. They came from special/inclusive education and home-based therapeutic environment of Lahore, Pakistan. Cases 1 to 3 were considered to be high functioning autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) cases, while cases 4 to 6 were considered as low functioning autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). The cases in this study are captured as C1–C6 and not named and children's personhood is not described in terms of functioning. The ages of the cases ranged, with some younger and others older; their communication profile was also varied, with some of them having a greater variety of needs and interests, as well as differing sensory patterns and preferred expressive modalities. It was a variation that was useful analytically since it was not meant to define one pathway to identity for autistic individuals, but rather to explore convergences and contrasts.

Children with available clinical or school documentation verifying their diagnosis, with informed consent from their parent(s) or guardian(s) were included in the study. Data was gathered in familiar education, therapeutic and home-like settings as opposed to a setting of data assessment. Ethical procedures, data security, parent consent, peer review, and researcher reflexivity were all covered in the study.

3.3. Data sources

A total of four sources of evidence were combined: (a) naturalistic observations of classroom, therapy, social, sensory, creative and daily-living activities (b) field notes, including information on behaviour, setting, emotional climate and researcher reflection on the observations (c) videotapes of a few sessions and (d) semi-structured interviews with parents. Drawing, collage, art and craft, writing, typing, music, sorting, clay work, sports and other preferred activities were all activities that the

children enjoyed, and which were child orientated. These sources were not considered to be mutually exchangeable. Situated behaviour was captured in the observation; contextual and reflexive information was captured in the field notes; review of interactional detail was captured in the video; and there was longitudinal and home-context information captured in the parent interviews.

3.4. Data analysis

The analysis went on two levels, which were intimately linked. First, the data were organized into a matrix for each case that included observations, field notes, video data, creative products, and data from the interviews with the parents. Descriptive and in-vivo codes were used for the first cycle of coding to be as close as possible to children's actions, preferences and expressions. Analytical jottings were made to show any interpretation, any questions, any comparisons and possible relationships. These codes were then merged to case level categories and themes. Second-cycle pattern and axial coding analyzed the correlates of categories and simplified individual case interpretations. Relationship between categories and refinement of individual case interpretations were analyzed using second-cycle pattern and axial coding.

Cross case synthesis was the second level. Repetitive codes were contrasted between C1–C6, convergent and divergent codes were analyzed, higher order codes were created, and the 5 cross case themes were identified. The analysis was more of an iterative process than a linear one, with new interpretations leading to a re-scrutinizing of previous interpretations. This corresponded with the study's interactionist assumption that meanings are negotiated and may be clarified when there is a comparison of contexts.

3.5. Trustworthiness and reflexivity

The methodological triangulation, peer review/debriefing, repeated viewing of the video, and comparison of parent accounts with patterns observed enhanced credibility. Parents' member checking case summaries description of the study also. Reflexive journaling was employed to bring to light the researcher's own deficit interpretation of the term of quietness and/or repetitive behaviour as a special educator. For instance, withdrawal was initially thought to be a grooming pattern and when combined with context and the repetition of behaviour, self-care and self-presentation were considered. Likewise, a collage activity was again re-thought as a way of developing a story of relationships instead of only an activity that is limited or repetitive. These were reflexive changes as it is easy to misread nonverbal communication and end up conveying an adult assumption.

The study was context related and did not aim for statistical generalization. Therefore its claims are analytic and interpretive: the cases show mechanisms and patterns that might be of interest for theory, practice, and further research - not necessarily the frequency of specific identity expressions.

3.6. Ethical considerations

The study had parental/guardian permission and consent to participate in educational settings. In this study, children were anonymized with the use of pseudonymized case codes. Since the data contained creative products as well as activities that were video recorded, if you submit a journal entry, you should use only items of which you have explicit permission to publish. For the central argument, no identifying information about the school, family or clinical setting is necessary and should not be included in the final submitted manuscript if it might be a threat to anonymity.

4. Findings

This is an overview of the cross case patterns.

In all six cases, the theme of self-identity was most clearly apparent as a string of relationships between preference, participation, emotional response, competence, relationships and context. In all cases, the six children demonstrated intentional engagement when activities were challenging to their interests, or when the sensory demands of the activities were manageable. The way in which the expression was expressed, however, was quite different, and varied widely. Writing, typing, sports and structured tasks were important modalities that were used in C1 and C2. C3 employed music, singing, performance, social engagement and very memorable competencies. C4, C5 and C6 were more visually, tactile, embodied and creative in expression e.g. collage, drawing, clay, colour, movement, grooming, sensory regulation.

Structured participation, adult scaffolding, limited spontaneous peer initiation, alternative and nonverbal expression, sensory influence, special interest, competence, agency, family significance and context dependence were all emergent themes in the cross-case matrix. The five themes of these patterns were then combined.

4.1. Theme 1: Approach to social interaction not deficit.

In all cases, there was not a complete lack of awareness of others or communicative intent, but rather, there was a lack of spontaneous initiative to engage in communication with others. Social interaction was often selective, structured, mediated

and/or channel specific. Adults' structuring of the situation was effective in facilitating C1's verbal communication and participation. C2 expressed himself better in written and typed modes of communication than in extended speaking. C3's social participation shifted in the face of structured group activities, performance opportunities, and adult guidance, and his social participation shifted when environmental events become unexpected. For C4 & C6, the forms of mediation that were more common were gestures, shared activity, sensory materials, art, movement, and adult prompts.

C2 is an example to illustrate this point. He wrote that in a self-description activity as “I want to grow up to be a cricketer” and “I like writing on the computer” when he was asked what his favourite means of communication was. It was not so much that the child was able to write as that these statements were important. Instead, the written modality became visible in a preference; an aspiration for the future; a competence; and a communicative choice, which were less apparent in spoken interaction. His fascination with the game also facilitated participation, motivation, rule compliance and future-oriented self-description.

It therefore appeared that the pattern was indicative of a continuum of social interaction than a dichotomy of socially competent and socially deficient. From a symbolic interactionist point of view the analytical issues are not only whether the interaction is an appropriate form of social interaction, but what the interaction is and what it does in the relationship.

4.2. Theme 2: Family as a relational foundation of self-identity

In all six cases, family relationships were important. Some of the details shared by parents included preferences, sensory history, communication pattern, emotional triggers and abilities that may not have been exhibited in a specific session. Most importantly, family members were present in the children's experiences of identity as a source of recognition, security, interpretation and continuity between the home and the educational context.

With children who speak little or no English, parents frequently served as interpreters of preferred meanings instead of inventing meanings. Parent reports, for instance, were useful in helping the context for a child's persistent selection of certain foods, textures, writing activities, music or art. The medium for emotions and thoughts to be understood in C3 was particularly singing, as described by the parent. Socio-emotional connections to creative activities and preferred activities were established using family accounts in C4 and C5. In C1 and C2, parents wrote that their children's writing and typing, sports and other skills were interests beyond individual lessons.

This was in line with an interactional point of view on identity: recognition from significant others can reinforce the meanings of the choices the child makes. Also an important cultural aspect is presented. Family did not play a peripheral background role in Pakistan as was evidenced in the study. It was in the context of the child's daily life and as such was part of the social world in which the sense of self was identifiable.

4.3. Theme 3: Sensory sensitivity influencing sense of self

Sensory experiences were observed to affect how children were accessing, staying in or leaving activities. Participation, emotional regulation and availability for social engagement may be impacted by auditory, tactile, gustatory and environmental stimuli. It is noteworthy that sensory responses were not solely considered to be clinical symptoms. They also shared with them information regarding preference, boundaries, comfort, self-regulation, and circumstances of when the child could participate.

In C3, the contextuality of sensory response is being discussed. At lunch, a water spill occurred which resulted in a quick unwarranted anxious reaction. The child was visibly upset and restless until the teacher calmed them down by addressing the spill and assuring the group that everything is okay, then the child got back to the activity. The process was analytically significant since it showed that social deficit wasn't the only factor for participation. There was sudden disruption in the child's state, and the adult was predictable in supporting the child's recovery.

C4 was interested in certain types of tactile experiences, such as jelly balls and glue. These materials were related to calmness, ability to sustain attention, and positive affect. She had previously been averse to certain textures, but this aversion had reportedly decreased with time. In C6, the sensitivity of the auditory sense was also observed during music activity and was positively affected by having medium and gentle sound levels and supportive touch. These cases suggested that sensory accommodation might be able to alter the conditions under which social participation and self-expression is possible.

The finding corroborated research which highlights sensory processing as a key factor to be considered for autistic participation (Robertson and Baron-Cohen, 2017). Furthermore, it brought to the fore the connection between sensory regulation and identity expression – what a child seeks, avoids, tolerates, or engages in to regulate may indicate sensory thresholds and preferences and conditions for agency. Again, there is a contextual interpretation; sensory behaviour was only considered ‘identity relevant’ if there was repeated evidence to support the interpretation and if the relationship with participation and/or preference was clear.

4.4. Theme 4: Special interests as ways of expression

There was a strong consistency in terms of identity-related pathways across cases, with special interests being some of the most prevalent. These comprised writing, typing, cricket, computers, cycling, music, singing, debate, drawing, collage, clay, fashion, colour and grooming – among other hobbies and interests. These activities were not just limited interests; they could sometimes serve as a secure base for children to express their competence, feelings, aspirations, preferences and sense of belonging.

C2's writing and cricket were prominent. His statements were written and he linked a current skill with a future goal, and cricket was a vessel for him to have enthusiasm, determination, take turns, stick to rules, and invest in emotions. The singing and performance in C3 also related competence to feeling. Art and creative activities were very significant in C4 – C6. C5 drew and used clay to explore future roles and emotional significance of representations; C4 collaged their dress using colour, material selection, touch and focus. C6 used visual work and grooming/expression interests as a method of self-presentation in an aesthetic and embodied way.

The findings provided support to the argument that interests can be developmental assets when the educator worked with them as such, rather than trying to suppress them. Educational benefits of special interests have been recognized by Winter-Messiers (2007), and strengths-based, auto directional and meaningful participation is a theme of contemporary scholarship in the area of neurodiversity (Pellicano & den Houting, 2022). The cases also identified the fact that special interests can also serve as identity resources - they can provide a sense of “theirs”, help to build competence, and give adults a way to initiate communication that is more likely to be the child's preferred one.

4.5. Theme 5: The construction of identity: a contextual process

The fifth theme used the other four themes. Self-identity was flexible depending on the situation, as children's opportunities to express themselves fluctuated with the sensory demands, communication modality, adult responsiveness, task predictability and access to preferred interests. A child might be passive or rely on others in one environment, and assertive, competent and independent in another. This isn't necessarily a sign of inconsistency and not being consistent.

Where children had meaningful choices in their participation and adults scaffolded participation without taking over the activity, across cases, identity became more visible. A pattern emerged in the cases: predictable environments facilitated regulation, regulation opened up opportunities for participation, participation motivated preferred activities and successful participation facilitated opportunities for competence, recognition, and agency. In this regard, the notion of identity was not found entirely “within” the child. It arose in the child/people/activity/sensory environment/meaning dynamic.

This was in line with the Dialogical Self Theory where different positions of the self-emerged in the different activities and relationships (Hermans, 2001). It is also applicable to a Symbolic Interactionist approach as meanings were created and modified in interaction. Perhaps most importantly, it defies the notion that the child needs to exhibit "normative" social behaviour in order to be seen as having a "sense of self".

5. Discussion

The main finding in this study concerns the shift away from self-identity being a predominantly verbal psychological phenomenon, and toward being a distributed process and a function of context with autistic children. In six cases identity was seen in social participation, sensory preferences, special interests, creative expression, competence and aspirations and relationships. The findings thus extended previous identity studies from the verbal self-report perspective to the one of enacting, negotiating, and recognizing this sense of self in everyday situations.

The first theme, social interaction as style, rather than deficit, is echoed in studies of qualitative autism research which demonstrate that social interaction may have a meaningful function without being 'typical' (Ochs & Solomon, 2010). It additionally meshes with findings from studies that indicate school experiences and interpersonal reactions impact self-understanding (Williams et al., 2019; Cooper et al., 2023). The question in the study was not if a child was conventionally reciprocating at all times, but if there were ways for him or her to initiate, respond, choose, share, and seek recognition. The response was always "yes" but the nature and extent of assistance varied.

Relational and embodied aspects of identity are conveyed in the second and third themes. The conditions for children's participation were largely determined by the extent to which they could be recognized by their families and accommodated by their senses. This mirrors evidence that external acceptance and support are related to positive autistic identity (Davies et al., 2024). The study indicated that acceptance should be seen less as the positive attitudes and more as the practical responses, such as adjusting the sound, predictable routines, acceptance of the use of preferred materials, interpretation of communication modes and giving the children opportunities to choose.

The fourth theme of special interests as channels of expression is of great interest in the context of education. From the data, interests were found to be able to be used as motivators, as communication channels, as emotional regulators, as competency domains, and as an identity marker. This multifunctionality calls into question approaches to intensive interests as "behaviours to be reduced". Interests, when considered carefully, can be a source to engage in areas of literacy, social involvement, self-advocacy, vocational goals, and expression. That did not mean, however, that the finding could be taken to apply to all autistic children saying that they all want interests included in all activities. The appropriate principle is that the individual child's expressed choices are to be responded to.

The fifth theme is a consolidation of these findings, based on the notion of context. The level of social engagement may be more or less dependent on sensory load, task structure, communication modality, adult mediation and familiarity with the child. This serves an interactionist and embodied approach towards autism in which person and environment are interwoven (De Jaegher, 2013). It also reminds us not to make a single observation a definitive statement of identity. Multiple observations and triangulation with others who know the child well is a better way to understand a child's identity-related expression.

The study results also bore implications for the understanding of agency. In this study agency was not taken as synonymous with independence. Some children needed adult prompting, scaffolding and/or sensory support but they also made preferences and choices in relation to these supports. It is critical in special education that dependence on assistance does not take away agency. The purpose of education should not be to deprive the child of the opportunities to exercise meaningful choice until he is at normative independence.

The study thus suggested the following conceptual model in a practical way: recognition, accommodation, participation, competence, expression, strengthened sense of self. This is not a statistically produced causal model; it is an interpretive amalgamation of the cases. When the mode of recognition is recognized, accommodation is possible, which then makes participation possible, providing opportunities to demonstrate competence, social recognition, and further opportunities to express oneself. This overtime can sustain a more apparent and appreciated sense of self.

5.1. Implications for special education and practice

One of the first things to assess is the way in which a person functions with regard to himself, and this should be done in several modes of expression. Verbal questions like 'Who are you?', 'What do you like?', should not be used as the sole basis for assessing self-awareness by teachers or therapists. The ability to draw, write, type, use objects to make choices, use movement, to make structured choices, and to observe recurring preferences, can complement verbal assessment.

Second, individual's educational plans will include the types of communication and conditions that facilitate participation. Some kids may find writing or typing a more consistent way to express themselves than talking. Others might show preferences and competencies through art, music, moving, tactile materials, or routines. These modalities should not be regarded as being just an alternative to serious activities.

Thirdly, sensory support needs should not just be viewed as a behaviour management issue. The availability of predictable transition, opportunity for sensory regulation, respecting tactile/food preference and minimizing unexpected noise can provide parameters for communication and social engagement.

Fourth, it is the responsibility of the educators to use special interests as a link to learning and self-expression. Literacy, numeracy, communication, vocational exploration and social participation can be enhanced with the introduction of a range of interests including cricket, computers, writing, music, art, colour, animals, fashion or others as appropriate to the child.

Fifth, adult mediation needs to be responsive, but not a substitute. The results indicate that prompts and scaffolding can allow for participation, however, adults should refrain from talking for the child when the child can express him or herself by some other means. The difference is that one is to provide access to expression and the other is to substitute the child's expression with adult interpretation.

Last, families should be viewed as a partner in an identity-based educational plan. Parents are often very aware of history and significance of preference that is not apparent from observations in school. No knowledge should be used in isolation as gospel, nor should it be ignored.

5.2. Strengths and limitations

The methodological depth of a six individual cases was the main strength of the study. Naturalistic observation, field notes, videotaping, creative activities, and parent interviews allowed for triangulation and the maintenance of individual case identity and for cross case comparisons. The interpretive account was further reinforced through the iterative coding process and the reflexive practice. The study also covered an underrepresented geographical context and children with communication profiles that varied greatly.

There are a number of caveats to the interpretation of these limitations. First, the sample was small and purposively selected, and the results were statistically generalizable, but not analytically. Secondly, the primary researcher was a special educator who was neurotypical, and the interpretation of nonverbal expression involves researcher judgment. This problem was mitigated but not eliminated by reflexive journaling, peer review and triangulation. Third, parent interviews were adult mediated and should not be confused with self-report from the child. Fourth, observations were made over a limited timeframe, which means that they do not allow the study to determine how identity expressions vary over time. Lastly, the study does not make an identity statement of any observed preferences or behaviors, but rather the interpretation depends on the frequency, context, and confirmation of the observed preferences or behaviors.

6. Conclusion

In this multiple case study, it was proposed that meaningful, agentive and recognizable self-identity can occur even in the absence of traditional verbal self-descriptions and spontaneous peer interaction. In six cases, identity was manifested in ways of social interaction, family relationships, sensory preferences, special interests, creative activities, technological communications, embodied actions, aspirations, and context-specific choices. It is clear that the five cross-case themes collectively question a reductionism of social difference to absence of self.

Theoretically, the study has helped to put an interactionist view of self into dialogue with autism research with a neurodiversity perspective. The methodological contribution is that multiple sources, which are child-centred, context-situated and supported the concept of identity-related expression were considered and the problem of requiring all children to verbally narrate their inner worlds was not tackled. The practical contribution was from the question asked by most people when considering an autistic child, namely whether they can engage in social norms behaviours, to how the child expresses a preference, agency, competence, belonging and meaning in supportive circumstances.

The implication for special education is clear and significant; children should not need to communicate in the dominant mode first before their sense of self is recognized. The more one sees the more educational environments can be made accessible to children's sensory needs, meaningful to their favorite interests, and offer alternative means of expression, which can be seen as scaffolding and not as replacement for adult support. Longitudinal designs, participatory designs involving autistic children's preferred modes of communication, culturally diverse samples, and with autistic researchers and advisors should be developed on this work.

7. Declarations

7.1. Ethics statement

This article has been taken from the doctoral thesis completed by the author. Thesis documents include obtaining parental/guardian consent, institutional clearance, data security measures, and ethics protection. If the journal to which the article is submitted asks for the exact identifier and date of the institutional ethics/approval, the author should include them in the doctoral record before submitting it to the journal.

7.2. Consent for publication

The publication of any identifiable image of a child, artwork, video still or word-for-word text must only be done in the event of specific consent to publish having been obtained. The present manuscript does not include any identifying information and employs case codes.

7.3. Data availability

Individual level raw data should not be made available publicly as there is sensitive information relating to children and families in the dataset. Where allowed by the original consent and institutional requirements, de-identified analytic materials may be considered**.**

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed., text rev.; DSM-5-TR). American Psychiatric Association Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787

Blumer, H. (1969). Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method. University of California Press.

Cohen, S. R., Joseph, K., Levinson, S., Blacher, J., & Eisenhower, A. (2022). “My autism is my own”: Autistic identity and intersectionality in the school context. Autism in Adulthood, 4(4), 315–327. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2021.0087

Davies, J., Cooper, K., Killick, E., Sam, E., Healy, M., Thompson, G., Mandy, W., Redmayne, B., & Crane, L. (2024). Autistic identity: A systematic review of quantitative research. Autism Research, 17(5), 874–897. https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.3105

De Jaegher, H. (2013). Embodiment and sense-making in autism. Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience, 7, Study 15. https://doi.org/10.3389/fnint.2013.00015

Hermans, H. J. M. (2001). The construction and reconstruction of a dialogical self. Culture & Psychology, 7(3), 243–281. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X0173001

Kapp, S. K., Gillespie-Lynch, K., Sherman, L. E., & Hutman, T. (2013). Deficit, difference, or both? Autism and neurodiversity. Developmental Psychology, 49(1), 59–71. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028353

Mead, G. H. (1934). Mind, self, and society. University of Chicago Press.

Milton, D. E. M. (2014). Autistic expertise: A critical reflection on the production of knowledge in autism studies. Autism, 18(7), 794–802. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361314525281

Ochs, E., & Solomon, O. (2010). Autistic sociality. Ethos, 38(1), 69–92. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1352.2009.01082.x

Pellicano, E., & den Houting, J. (2022). Annual Research Review: Shifting from 'normal science' to neurodiversity in autism science. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 63(4), 381–396. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13534

Robertson, C. E., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2017). Sensory perception in autism. Nature Reviews Neuroscience, 18(11), 671–684. https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn.2017.112

Robertson, A. E., & Simmons, D. R. (2015). The sensory experiences of adults with autism spectrum disorder: A qualitative analysis. Perception, 44(5), 569–586. https://doi.org/10.1068/p7833

Winter-Messiers, M. A. (2007). From tarantulas to toilet brushes: Understanding the special interest areas of children and youth with Asperger syndrome. Remedial and Special Education, 28(3), 140–152. https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325070280030301

Yin, R. K. (2018). Case study research and applications: Design and methods (6th ed.). SAGE.