Autistics in (Educational) Space: Building our own Futures

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Abstract

Autistic students in inclusive classrooms are often judged by their in/ability to adhere to neurotypical norms while affordances they create to survive and succeed often go unacknowledged. An affordance describes a sociomaterial approach by an individual to increase the number of possible actions available to them when in environments where their presence was not anticipated and when that environment is passively or actively hostile to their participation. I, an autistic teacher, student, and researcher, led a participatory research study of affordances with four autistic adults who attended secondary schools in Ontario, Canada. We ask, how can public, inclusive secondary schooling be improved by better understanding and responding to autistic affordances? In response, our study develops and critically evaluates new research methods. These methods challenge conventional qualitative research forms by actively recognising and embracing autistic ways of being, learning and relating. The methods are cultural probes (physical items and tasks participants respond to), shared reading (reading a novel and meeting one-on-one to discuss how it reflected the participants' life) and speculative fiction and world building (a collaborative writing exercise involving an imaginary future).

Thematic analysis of the cultural probes data reveals affordances of over/under-achieving and hyper-empathy. Participants were unsupported/misunderstood when they needed help, and all appeared to experience extraordinary empathy (especially for other autistic people). Data from the shared reading of Sønderby's 2017 science fiction novel *Failure to Communicate* highlights affordances associated with responses to autism, education, identity, and others. In speculative fiction and world building, participants rejected approaches to adding inclusivity to existing school structures and created a world where autistic people together create futurities where acceptance of differences is foundational to society. Many affordances relate to resisting school structures systematically misrecognising autistic ways-of-being, worldviews, and futurities.

This dissertation adds to research in Inclusive Education by exploring autistic affordances as a basis for school reform and to CBPR education research methods by developing and critically reflecting on methods purposefully designed for autistic participants. The dissertation concludes with policy and practice recommendations to improve Inclusive mainstream classrooms and pre- and in-service teacher education as well as suggestions for further education research.

Dedication

To my wife, Tanya, who is responsible for putting me on this path and encouraging me in all the terrible choices that led me here.

To my son, Malcolm, who has been a student along with me for most of his life.

To my mother, who has no idea what I do but has encouraged me throughout and would really love if I could get a job already.

Acknowledgments

In 2017 my wife thought it would be good for me to have more in my life that just my supply teaching. She thought I would find York's Science and Technology Studies (STS) program interesting because I had degrees in both Computer Science and English and it was (in very brief) a humanities examination of science. She thought I might enjoy taking a course or two.

I registered as a full-time student and completed my BScH in two years.

I applied for, and was accepted into the MA in STS, the MEd in Education, and the JD at Osgoode Hall Law School. Because the one lottery ticket I bought did not win, I did not go to law school and instead went to the MA in STS. However, a few weeks in, we were told that they forgot to let us know the program was being paused the next year and continuing to the PhD would not be possible.

After a year of meeting with multiple administrators at York nothing was accomplished until the very last minute when I was offered admission to the PhD in Education. An offer sent to an email account at York I did not know I even had, and not the email address we had been using all year. Only in August, when they sent the "this is the last chance to accept" email to the correct address (and I found out what the thing I was being offered was) did I join the PhD cohort that started in September 2020. The year everything went online because of the pandemic.

Joining the program late, I was given a TA position in the Writing Department in the Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies (LA&PS) instead of in my home Faculty of Education. This meant that my connection to my faculty was exclusively through my courses, which, as I mentioned, were all online. One of our weekly tasks for the doctoral seminar was to write for 20 minutes, and I created a weekly writing Zoom meeting for classmates to write while online together. The time changed, people came and went, and people brough other people from outside our cohort. The weekly Zoom became a regular, daily, working group with people online regularly. The connections I made with these people are the friendships that helped me get through this program.

To my Writing Department course directors, Drs. Dunja Baus, Jon Sufrin, and Maxine Wood: Working on the same course with each of you provided amazing insights into both writing and teaching. All of you were supportive, kind, and a pleasure to work with. I also want to mention Andrea McKenzie, chair of the department for some of my time there, who always made me feel welcome and appreciated.

To my colleagues at the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation District 16 Teacher/Occasional Teacher Bargaining Unit: Thank you for the interest you've shown in my work, asking me how things are going in our meetings, and putting up with me starting a teardown of bad ideas with "I published a paper/chapter on that and I know it's wrong." A special thanks to our president, Muna Kadri, who is the personification of leadership and encourages my

good troublemaking. Also, I want to mention Carmella Goodridge, one of the kindest, most empathic, and bravest warriors for equity I know. I also want to thank Jennifer Speiran, a tireless fighter for disability in the union and the workplace whose support and encouragement have helped me get through difficult battles where disabled members needs were weighed against money and lost.

To my AI writing group, Katie Barron, Ellie VanBerkel, and Dr. Aaron Richmond: Thank you for inviting me in when you needed a person with a computer science background. The work we did together provides a unique look at an area of AI harm that is not considered by most people taking about this technology.

To my friends in the Zoom writing group, Dr. Brittany Tomin, Dr. Sheetal Prasad, Kristy Smith: Brittany is responsible for getting me mixed up in all this science fiction and speculative writing stuff, and Sheetal liked to come into the Zoom to distract me. She also tried to poison me once. About Kristy I have only nice things to say.

To Carol, thank you for crafting the Dream Pillows for me.

To my committee, Drs. Steve Alsop, Melanie Baljko, and Gillian Parekh: Thank you for your support, your invitations to work on projects, and providing me with guidance in getting through this maze.

Finaly, to my participants: Thank you for your time and effort in providing me with your stories. I hope you think I've done them justice.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Background

Research on autism tends to be split into two strands. One is that of the so-called 'hard' sciences: biology, neurology, genetics, etc. This kind of research sees autism as a problem to be solved: what causes it, how can it be detected as early as possible, and how can it be eliminated? Governmental approaches have historically taken this stance, labeling autism as an epidemic (see, for example, 'Autism Epidemic Runs Rampant,' Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, 2025) that would drain the state's bank accounts (Cakir et al., 2020; The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 2007). In education this led to school practices of exclusion (Webster, 2025), segregation (Alyass & Buist, 2025), and questioning if autistic students could even be taught to understand emotions (Hadwin et al., 1996). The other strand looks at autism as a social issue, where the natural behaviours of an autistic person are stigmatized because they do not align with what society has decided is the 'proper' way of doing things. In education, despite a turn towards differentiated instructions and universal design for learning (UDL), there remains a core set of 'proper behaviours' that students are expected to adhere to (Larcenciel, 2025). For autistic students, who experience sensory differences (Price & Romualdez, 2025), difficulties with 'appropriate' social interactions (DiSalvo & Oswald, 2002), and may not understand unspoken rules (Byrne, 2022), navigating the education system can be especially fraught. But is this binary the only option?

Behind this theoretical binary are actual students in actual classrooms. Research suggests that autistic students experience higher levels of absenteeism than their peers in the US and UK, with potential causes suggested including lack of accommodations or bullying (Nordin et al.,

2024). Other research indicates that students at school may be sensory-seeking or overstimulated leading to anxiety or underachievement (Price & Romualdez, 2025). In interviews, autistic students report that school is "noisy," "really hot and stuffy," and a "sensory nightmare," where teachers "shout a lot" and "yell and talk aggressively" (Smith et al., 2025, p. 5). Neither a social nor medical model view of these experiences will give a full picture of the issues students are experiencing. But there is an alternative lens that might.

There has been a movement in critical disability studies to use disability studies *as the method* of research (see, for example, Dokumaci, 2018; Dokumacı, 2023; Minich, 2016, 2017; Schalk, 2017). In the introduction to their collection *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method*, editors Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez (2023) also use the term "cripistemology" for disability as method, and describe it as encompassing "disabled ways of thinking, knowing, and telling" while intentionally leaving space for "negativity, failure, hopelessness, and passivity" (p. 10). Dokumaci (2023) argues that disability as method means there is no need to locate the disability somewhere, create boundaries, and police them. Instead, disability as method produces a political/relational model of disability that is a site for questions and not of firm definitions. In using this approach, I avoid medicalizing or pathologizing autistic people while acknowledging that disability has downsides, including heath ones that may require medical intervention, and simultaneously accept that for some autism is an identity and a source of pride. In this research, educational interventions, not medical ones, are the focus, however, the same diametric forces – pride and accommodations – are at play. These forces are fed by media attempts to pit non-disabled people against disabled people and their need for accommodations. As an example, the January 2026 article "Accommodation Nation" in the *Atlantic* (Horowitch, 2025) objects to the increase in students receiving accommodations in US universities. Arguments that some students

with accommodations don't *really* need them can be difficult to counter for autistic students who have spiky profiles (Milton & Green, 2024) and only have difficulties in some situations, and they may feel shame at being offered what others see as unfair advantages. At the same time as these accusations of gaming the system are being published, autistic organizations are encouraging autistic or neurodivergent pride in contrast to stigmatizing language from the medical and educational systems. How do educators support autistics' needs while also encouraging autistic pride?

Research overview

In this research project I seek to question why and how secondary schools' expectation of a particular normate user disadvantages autistic students by having autistic high school graduates use worldbuilding techniques to reimagine what schooling can look like. The intent of this research is to problematize the status quo about 'knowing the classroom' and whose way of knowing is legitimized.

For this research I seek to question inclusive educational practices that attempt to force autistic people into neurotypical norms by examining the affordances autistic people create to exist in spaces that do not anticipate them. To do this I adopt and create research methods that challenge and destabilize conventional formats by actively recognizing, embracing, and fostering autistic ways of being, learning, and relating. I begin by asking how community based participatory education research methods can be responsive and attuned to autistic ways of interacting, sharing, and imagining. These methods reveal and make visible the autistic affordances created by my participants, each of whom has moved through the mainstream public school system and has their own repertoire. I then ask what these affordances can tell us about ways to transform inclusive secondary school structures and practices, creating an anticipation

for some autistic bodyminds where none currently exists. I reflect on the strengths and limitations of using autistic-informed CBPR methods to study affordances in secondary schooling and how might this shape future research and practice.

This is the first step on a long road to create change in the education system. As Rincón-Gallardo (2019) points out, "widespread cultural change in classrooms and school systems occurs when new pedagogical principles and practices developed by a critical community are taken up by movements that spread them in the pedagogical, the social, and the political arenas." (p. 58). The current education system can also be seen as operating in a specific paradigm, in the manner of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). To undergo a paradigm shift there needs to be a build up of unanswerable questions that lead to a crisis, and one area where the current paradigm is constantly struggling is the full and enthusiastic inclusion of disabled students. By developing "new pedagogical principles and practices" this work is intended to form the basis of one part of a distributed, multipronged set of activisms to disrupt the normate view of what education is and move closer to that paradigm shift.

Research question

How can public, inclusive secondary schooling be improved by better understanding and responding to autistic affordances?

Dokumaci (2023) writes that as disabled people create a collection of affordances to navigate shrinking environments they create a "disability repertoire" (p. 227) that is potentially transferable. These affordances are the means of access disabled people must discover, invent, or be granted to move through areas not designed for/expecting them. The following four sub-questions attempt to discover the repertoires of the participants to make them available to all.

1. How can community-based participatory education research methods be responsive and attuned to autistic ways of being, learning, and world-building?
2. What autistic affordances become visible through these methods?
3. What implications do these autistic affordances have for transforming inclusive secondary school structures and practices?
4. What are strengths and limitations of using autistic-informed CBPR methods to study inclusive education in secondary schooling, and how might this shape future research and practice?

Description of the Study

In order to learn how to best serve autistic students we need to find new ways to research this population that are respectful, inclusive, and participant-led because often research on ways to help disabled people produces solutions that disabled people themselves do not want, welcome, or use (Maaß & Buchmüller, 2018). To do this it is necessary to reassess standard methods of data collection when using them with a population they were not designed for. Due to the different styles of communication preferred by autistic people, many of the traditional methods of information gathering are less effective. For example, open ended questions and ranking type questions are often stressful for autistics to navigate, as are questions with any ambiguity. To circumvent this problem, I have used alternative methods for data collection: cultural probes, shared reading, and structured world building using speculative fiction. These tools help establish mutual trust with my participants, which is critical for the success of the project (Maaß & Buchmüller, 2018) and acts as a scaffold (Halpern et al., 2013) because I, like Gaver et al. (1999), "wanted to lead a discussion … toward unexpected ideas, but we didn't want to dominate it." (p. 22). Gaver et al. (1999) argued that researchers had to find a path between

looking like doctors making a diagnosis and prescribing a cure, or casting themselves in the role of a servant by letting the research subjects set the entire direction of the study. While not intentional referencing the medical model of disability, this claim that there are only two poles, doctor or servant, does echo the idea that a disability is a problem to solve either by the medical system or the individual. Using my three methods I hope to find a more cooperative path, one co-created by the participants and the researcher.

My research seeks to find new ways to support autistic high school students using a mostly untapped resource: autistic people with lived experience (Hamraie & Fritsch, 2019; Milton, 2014; Woods & Waltz, 2019) of how well, or poorly, the school system supported them. In particular, the study was designed to examine what Dokumaci (2018) called the "micro-activist affordances" that participants create when confronted by "environmental affordances" that were not designed for them. Dokumaci (2018) noted that bodies that are expected are granted environment affordances that they do not have to work for, while other bodies have to find creative workarounds, which she calls micro-activist affordances. This is extra work that disabled bodies must engage in to be able to occupy spaces that do not anticipate them.

Much of the research on autism, autistic people, and autistic learning have been done by non-autistic researchers, leading to misunderstandings, miscommunication, and missed opportunities. As an autistic person, I can bypass some of the difficulties that Heasman & Gillespie (2019a) describe regarding ethnographic research that relies on "autistic-to-neurotypical interactions which take place against the cultural backdrop of neurotypical norms and expectations" (p. 910). Heasman & Gillespie (2019a) attribute this difficulty to inter-autistic communication lacking a social protocol, what Milton (2012) termed the "double empathy" problem. To avoid relying on binary, neuronormative ideologies, I developed a research design

that used “creative and open methodologies that provide an immersive shared experience” (Chapple, Davis, et al., 2021, p. 3) which I termed *Shared Reading.* A paper on the design of the first two strands of this project was published in 2025 (see Collis, 2025b).

This is a project that deals with the lived experience of autistic people, and so it is important to begin with my own positionality. In elementary school I was tested for and diagnosed with dyslexia and dysgraphia but received no supports. In university, at the recommendation of Undergraduate Program Director of Computer and Information Science I went to Student Academic Services to receive a diagnosis and support. To save the difficulties of expensive and time-consuming testing the councillor there diagnosed me with decreased muscle tone which provided the same exam accommodations: writing in a quiet room, using a computer, and extra time. When my son was diagnosed as autistic I saw how many of his habits I had at his age (or still had) were indicators for autism. Shortly after I applied to return to school for another bachelor’s degree and received a formal diagnosis so I would be eligible for supports. Thus I, like some of the participants, went through high school without a diagnosis or the supports a diagnosis would provide.

There are four participants in the research project. All had attended public high schools in the province of Ontario and gone on to secondary education. In other words, they were ‘successful’ in high school because they graduated and were accepted into a post-secondary education program (regardless of completion). The oldest at 29, Evan, was not diagnosed until his first year of university. He is a white male, and at the time of his participation he was in the final stages of his master’s degree. Gill, 28, is a white female who uses she/they pronouns. She received her autism diagnosis when she was 21 but was recently diagnosed as ADHD as well. They are on disability benefits because their sensory sensitivities and anxiety prevent them from working in

most entry level retail jobs. She has completed some college but is currently trying to figure out her next steps. Jason and Karen are both 20 years old and are undergraduate students at the same university. Jason, a non-speaking Indigenous male, hopes to go to law school after he graduates and become a lawyer with either the federal government or an Indigenous non-profit. Karen is a white female (she/her and they/them pronouns) in her second year of undergraduate studies who was diagnosed at 8 or 9 years old. Each of these people have a kind of expertise that is rarely valued in autism research. In a systematic review of the literate Horgan et al. (2023)

> recommended that future research prioritises the voices of young autistic people regarding various aspects of their mainstream educational experiences including social experiences, impact of the environment, transitional experiences and the potential impact of the mainstream environment on well-being and sense of belonging. … Over half of the included studies (n = 19) were multi-informant, often prioritising the voices of adult stakeholders. Only a small number of studies adopted multi-modal approaches which included the use of participatory methods to elicit the voices of student participants. (pp. 534-535)

While not all research includes or prioritizes the voices of non autistic people, a significant portion does (for exceptions, see, for example, Ashby, 2012; Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2009; Lebenhagen, 2024; Woodfield, 2016; Woodfield & Ashby, 2016).

Contents

In Chapter 2 I look at how autism is represented, because there is not a singular autism. As touched on previously, there are the medical and social models of disability, but there are also similar structural conceptions of autism. I begin with the medical model (the oldest), and two models that derive from it: that of recovery and of difficult students. I then take up the social model and finish the set of models with the neurodiversity model. Finaly, I look at how autistic

identities are constructed as a response to their treatment through Hacking's (1999) looping kinds.

In Chapter 3 I will examine the existing literature and report on the common ways autistic people are understood by educators and researchers. I will discuss Milton's (2012) concept of the double empathy problem which is hypothesized to interfere in communication between autistic and non-autistic people. I will examine what inclusive education looks like in general as well as specifically for autistic students. I will then examine research on autism, the way expertise is conceptualized and created, and how ignorance is also created. Finaly, I discuss existing research on the methods I have created and adopted for this project. In Chapter 4 I present my theoretical frameworks for this project: Dokumaci's (2023) proposal of activist affordances and disability studies as method (Minich, 2016; Schalk, 2017). Each of these theoretical frameworks provides a way to examine the lived experience of the participants. Activist affordances are the tricks and 'hacks' disabled people use to get around barriers that would otherwise prevent their participation in society. Disability as method is a way of finding the hidden barriers that activist affordances are required to overcome.

In Chapter 5 I describe my method in general, with specific details for each in their own chapters to follow (chapters 6, 7, and 8). I also describe my participants, four autistic people who have all graduated secondary school in Ontario and gone on to some form of post-secondary studies. They include a variety of gender identities, sexualities, and experiences.

In Chapter 6 I explain my method of cultural probes, the theory behind them, and how I used them to collect data. I present the results of nine of the probe activities.

In Chapter 7 I describe the shared reading method I designed and its theoretical underpinnings. I explain the process and how data was collected as well as describe the results.

In Chapter 8 I discuss how the collaborative world building exercise and the associated speculative fiction writing. I start with the theory behind this method, describe how the project was designed and report on the results of the participants' efforts.

In Chapter 9 I analyse the data from the preceding chapters. The cultural probe data suggests two themes that appeared across multiple probes: over/under-achieving and hyper-empathy. Each of the participants had experienced periods of great success and critical failure. While everyone has good and bad periods, the examples from the participants' lives appeared to demonstrate what autistic people have called the "gifted child to burned out adult pipeline" (see, for example, Key-Lavishness7867, 2024). Similarly, the participants all appeared to experience extraordinary empathy, including and especially for other autistic people, and wanted to change the world to better support them. In our shared reading of *Failure to Communicate* (Sønderby, 2017) the participants recalled experiences from their lives which might not have emerged using traditional methods. The results fell into multiple thematic categories, of which I focused on four: autism, education, identity, and the responses of others to their autistic identity or traits. In the speculative fiction and world building portion of the project the participants created an imaginary future world where the distrust and hatred of autistic people is intensified (Wolf-Meyer, 2019) and results in the creation of an autistic nation. The participants seeing little likelihood that autistic people would be accepted in our present world (which proved to be prophetic) resulted in the creation of a world where autistic people band together and create a place where acceptance of all differences is foundational to society.

In Chapter 10 I consider the totality of what has been learned and how it can inform policy and practice in education. I discuss the limitation of this research and make suggestions for future research endeavors.

Chapter 2 Representations of Autism

Introduction

Autism is not just one thing. To medical practitioners and other adherents of the medical model of disability it is defined by the criteria in the most recent version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the DSM-5-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). In this world view the DSM is an immutable mobile (Latour, 2005) that maintains a rigid definition of what autism is across all domains in which it is employed. However, this is not the only way autism is defined and to judge the efficacy of the various models they must first be introduced.

Representations of Autism: Medical Model/Medicalization/Deficit Model/'Surplus' Suffering/Individual Model

A prevalent view of autism is a "medical/psychiatric classificatory paradigm" that focuses on the deficits of autistic people (J. Clarke & van Amerom, 2007, p. 762). Researchers who subscribe to this model start their papers with a list of the deficits inherent to autistics. For example, Ballen & Kurtzberg (2021) describe "autism spectrum disorders" as

> a group of neurodevelopmental disorders that are mainly characterized by deficits in social communication and interactions. … Many individuals also have comorbidities, including intellectual disability, adaptive skill deficits, anxiety, and aggressive behaviors. … While autism is not a fatal disease, it causes lifelong morbidity in many affected individuals and their families. Those diagnosed with ASD who also have intellectual disability are unlikely to be able to live independently and may be dependent on parental/societal care for their entire life. (p. 823).

Some research in this vein medicalizes autism and seeks to find biomarkers, genetic indicators, or variances in biology to explain autism. In order to study why autistics are more likely to behave the same in public as they do in private than neurotypical people (referred to in the paper as “healthy controls”) Hu et al. (2020) used functional magnetic resonance imaging of the right temporoparietal junction to compare their brains when making moral decisions. The results showed that “while healthy controls were more likely to make the moral choice when they were observed in the Public condition … ASD patients did not change their behaviors significantly depending on the presence or absence of a witness” (p. 22). Even though the “ASD patients” were more likely than “healthy controls” to act in a moral way, they are medicalized, and their ethical behaviour is pathologized.

Kapp (2020) explains that the medical model “locates deficits and functional impairment within autistic people and conceptualises them as directly and uniquely causing disability” and treats any differences found in autistics as “dysfunctional” (p. 3). Such a view “empowers parents and professionals with the responsibility for treating individuals, regarded as submissive ‘patients’ defined as ‘collections of organs that can malfunction or become infected’” (p. 3). The language used in this model treats autistics as dehumanized beings ‘suffering’ from the 'symptoms' of their 'disorder', 'neurobiological condition', or 'sensory disturbance' (J. Clarke & van Amerom, 2007, p. 767). Organizations, such as charities, that fundraise off of the ‘suffering’ of autistics and the ‘hopelessness’ of their families use language to highlight a lack, making use of “negative adjectives such as 'deficit', 'impairment', 'challenged', 'life-long developmental disability', 'invisible disability' and 'severely disabling'.” (J. Clarke & van Amerom, 2007, p. 767). Kapp notes that the harms of this way of conceptualizing autism include

> dehumanisation that denies basic respect and dignity, pathologisation of neutral and positive differences, reductionism to a social disorder despite complex traits and sensorimotor underpinnings, and essentialism despite autism's fluid boundaries. … The medical model's separation of autism from the person and privileging of professionals dehumanises autistic people. (S. Kapp, 2020, p. 4)

Looking at autism through this lens also removes the responsibility from dominant society and places it on the individual autistic person. This "individual model" locates the problem of disability in the individual whose body is "abnormal, disordered and in need of repair in order to appear and function as 'normally' as possible" such that "exclusion from social spaces, rejection by employers, isolation and dependence are held to be the inevitable results of impaired bodies" so the "onus for adaptation and change is then placed upon these impaired bodies rather than on the environments that impede and exclude them." (Hodge et al., 2019, pp. 1361–2362). This model then proposes that only charity organizations, almost always run by people who are not members of the group the charity clams to help, are the only solution to 'solving' this problem. This gives them greater political and economic power than the minority group so long as they can claim their existence helps those in need, giving them a vested interest in maintaining the medical model, but causing additional harm to that group in the form of stereotypes, stigma, and fear (J. Clarke & van Amerom, 2007). Clarke and Fletcher (2004) differentiate between the 'necessary' difficulties a disabled or ill individual experience and the 'surplus suffering' (p. 112) caused by bias and stigma around their disability or illness. Because schools are designed with the "expectation that everybody will learn, at the same time and pace" and "sitting and listening quietly are valued as the appropriate behaviour" (Rincón-Gallardo, 2019, p. 39), actions that are "normal" for an autistic student are seen as disruptive and harmful to the orderly operation of the

classroom. In education, the result of medical model thinking is that any difficulties students encounter regarding physical access or accommodation, progress, behaviour, or social interactions are seen as "natural outcomes" and outside the responsibility of the school or teacher, relieving them from any responsibility to examine their practice or the "organisational and attitudinal barriers" the student faces (Hodge et al., 2019, pp. 1361–1362). This leads to higher risks of punishment, including suspensions (e.g., Ambler et al., 2015; Miller & Meyers, 2015; Slaughter et al., 2019).

Representations of Autism: Recovery/ABA/Constructs of Hope

An alternate way of conceptualizing autism education research is in terms of constructs of hope (Broderick, 2009). Much of the research examined above is focused on educating autistic students in ways that result in outcomes comparable to their non-autistic peers. In contrast to the dire prognosis of the difficulty representation above, this "rhetorical vision of hope" is attractive to parents as a counter to the sense of hopelessness that typically characterises autism discourse (Broderick, 2009, p. 264). Parents report feeling "righteous anger" and attempt to assign blame after a diagnoses, as well as having a "sense of disconnect" from their autistic child (Ritchie, 2008, p. 42). Other parents in the same study described feelings of hopelessness for their autistic son, and, out of a fear he would be institutionalized, they "distanced themselves emotionally to avoid being hurt in the future." (Ritchie, 2008, p. 45). Broderick (2009) found that most of the parents interviewed for their study drew on a common discourse when describing their experiences with Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA) therapy, treating it "as if they were merely mirroring some objective and taken-for-granted aspect of the world." (p. 265). These people's view of what was possible and what was not possible for an individual identified as autistic limited their ability to accept that a person could be autistic and successful. When these

parent's worldviews did not match successful autistic people's reality they would, instead of adjusting their expectations, discursively reconstitute that individual as a recovered autistic (Broderick, 2009). The term 'recovery' is "discursively constructed to describe a particular level of participation in ordinary life (e.g., jobs, college, friends, marriage) without necessitating a disavowal of identifying one's experiences and one's self with autism." (Broderick, 2009, p. 268). Researchers who subscribe to this view of autism research position autism as a "death in life" (Broderick, 2009, p. 269) and present two binaries: a vision of hope in opposition with hopelessness and one of autism and recovery such that "recovery within ABA discourse is discursively constructed as 'recovery (to normalcy).'" (Broderick, 2009, p. 270). Broderick notes that

> This binary conceptualization of hope versus hopelessness disciplines the conversation around hope and recovery by (a) discursively reproducing and representing autism (specifically) and disability (generally) as inherently tragic, catastrophic, and hopeless; (b) representing hope for recovery not as a vision of hope but as the only vision of hope for a young child labeled with autism, the desired ''end''; and (c) inextricably linking this ''only'' hope (for recovery, the desired end) with a specific intervention methodology, ABA, as the means necessary to attain that end. (Broderick, 2009, p. 270)

Broderick (2009) argues that the underlying assumptions of this "apparently common-sense assertion" are political and ideological, and they take on the task of breaking down the self-evident or naturalness of these assumptions (p. 272). They note that this idea of recovery to normality is mostly unquestioned and unexamined in the ABA literature but that this discourse

“informs educational practice in particular ways that proceed as if recovery were a precondition to full citizenship and full academic participation.” (Broderick, 2009, p. 278).

Representations of Autism: Difficult Students

Autism (in the context of education) is often described through a deficit model that focuses on what autistic students are unable to do and treats autism as something to be overcome. This ontological view permits educators to act without reflection on how their practice may not meet the student’s needs. For example, in an unstructured observation of an autistic students in a mainstream class, Wood (2019) describes an activity where the student, Rashan, was to create a leaflet:

> he was made to wait while the TA copied a paragraph of three sentences he had already written in his exercise book onto a white board, which Rashan then had to copy onto the leaflet, and subsequently, without any apparent educational benefit, back into his exercise book. Indeed, this entire task of 30 minutes and 30 seconds duration caused Rashan to become restless, bored, and upset, as indicated by comments such as "But I'm hungry", "It will take too long", "It's killing me", "It's annoying me", "I can't", as well as the numerous diversions he attempted to create, including chanting lines from action hero videos, an area of great interest to him. (Wood, 2019, pp. 6–7)

Another student was issued nearly identical questions (e.g., "Where does the bear go?") and instructions (e.g., "Find the bear") 73 and 53 times respectively over the 12 minutes of an activity – an activity that the student had been doing three times a day for weeks, with an extra time per day if he refused to participate (Wood, 2019, p. 7). Why did the instructors feel that these were optimal ways to structure activities? Four of the teachers and one of the TAs told

Wood that “repetition was a valuable teaching tool for autistic children” (Wood, 2019, p. 6) while 21 of the 36 staff described the extra support students needed was to keep them on track (Wood, 2019, p. 10). They seem to see no connection between forcing the student to engage in repetition, student resistance to engaging, and the student needing additional support to remain on task. The staff refused to alter approaches that had little educational value and attributed the “child's failure to comply to difficulties inherent to autism, rather than the tedious or repetitive nature of the activity itself” (Wood, 2019, p. 7). They did not see the problem as their being “set in their ways, self-oriented and routine-bound” but instead saw the students that way (Wood, 2019, p. 7).

Meindl et al. (2020) notes that while more autistic students are entering mainstream classrooms, often the parents find the outcomes unsatisfactory. One of the sources of this disappointment is teachers are not provided the training and resources to properly create inclusive classrooms. Studies have shown that general education teachers “feel underprepared to meet the challenges” inclusive classrooms present due to a lack of training and fear “disruptive behavior” associated with having autistic children in the class. (Meindl et al., 2020, p. 3). These issues are made more difficult when increasing curriculum complexity, high stakes testing, and “raised anxiety levels as a result of examination pressures” are considered (Young et al., 2017, p. 2).

Research shows that autistic students often achieve academically below their cognitive abilities, are more likely to experience absenteeism, suspension and exclusion, interact with peers less often and with lower quality of interaction, require greater amounts of one-on-one assistance, and are more likely to be bullied resulting in disruption to progress, reduced self-esteem, and difficulties with mental health (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 2). In addition, specific characteristics of autism can impact students’ performance at school, such as difficulties with

regulating their emotions to remain in a proper state for learning, forming and maintaining relationships, dealing with changes during the school day, managing conflicts, working in groups, and tasks involving fine motor skills, such as handwriting (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 7). Parents of non-autistic students often have negative attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic students in their child's class, fearing that the presence of an autistic student could influence their child to misbehave (copying the autistic child's behaviour) or reduce the amount of support they receive from the teacher (Hodges et al., 2020). These parents did not want to see whole class strategies implemented that did not provide a direct benefit to *their* child and feared that adding additional pressure to educators would reduce the quality of their child's education (Hodges et al., 2020). The result of this clash of interests is that parents were critical of educators and educators were defensive about their performance (Hodges et al., 2020).

Representations of Autism: Social Model

The social model of disability moves the burden from the individual to society, arguing that it is not the physical or mental impairments that cause harm, but rather the way society disables or excludes those who are different (Shakespeare, 2013). Under the social model the responsibility for disability is put on the "physical, social, cultural and economic systems and structures that diminish, marginalise and exclude" those with impairments instead of on the disabled person (Hodge et al., 2019, p. 1362). The social model is not monolithic and different regional variants exist. The North American social model is linked to the disability rights movement, which itself was developed alongside the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that fought against racial segregation and discrimination, while the UK social model sees disability as a social construct where physical, cognitive or behavioural differences are defined by the label applied to the individual through a process of power that does not value difference (Owens,

2015). One of the ways autistics have enacted the social model is by embracing their difference and forging a new identity. Instead of accepting the medical model's pathologizing label they argued that being autistic is not inherently wrong or disordered and created their own label for those who are "normal": neurotypicals (NTs) (J. Clarke & van Amerom, 2007, p. 769). In education the advantage of the social model for students is that it requires educators to reflect on why a student with an impairment is not learning in the existing school environment and to consider ways to provide appropriate support rather than to blame the student (Hodge et al., 2019). There are those, such as Shakespeare (2013), who are concerned that the social model is too antagonistic to medical concerns despite the social and biological always being entwined. Despite this, the social model is often the paradigm used by disabled activists seeking civil rights such as accommodations, access, and inclusion because it shifts the framing of disability from an individual medical issue to a societal and political one (Rosqvist et al., 2020).

An example of the difference that occurs when conceiving of autism through a social instead of medical model is the singular focus often displayed by autistics. A defining attribute of autism is an intense focus on a particular subject or activity (Wood, 2019), often seen in education as a deficit because it interferes with the student's ability to focus on what the teacher is doing. Under the medical model the student's focus on their "special interest" is described as "restricted", "fixated", "obsessive", and "ritualistic": something that must be "prevented or remediated" (Wood, 2019, p. 2). Wood (2019) refuted the medical model and studied how this focus could be used to improve success for autistic students, using more positive terms such as "strong interests" and "intense interests" (p. 2), and engaged the concept of monotropism to de-medicalize this behaviour (p. 5). While a monotropic thinking style still has downsides for educators, such as difficulties understanding other people's perspectives, by working with the

student's interest instead of against it the student experiences "improved learning and curriculum access, better cooperativity and social skills, increased participation in after-school clubs and improved fine motor skills and social and communication abilities" (p. 5-6). Wood noticed in her observations that there was an improvement in the communication skills of some autistic students when they were centred on their interests. By treating what the medical model sees as a "symptom" instead as a potential strength, "deficiencies" are inverted and made positives.

Representations of Autism: The Neurodiversity Movement

The concept of neurodiversity, that across humanity there is a diversity of neurological ways of being, was collaboratively developed "by autistic and 'cousin' members of the autism rights/neurodiversity movement, certainly by 1996, and likely earlier." (Botha et al., 2024, pp. 2–3). In its simplest form, the neurodiversity movement argues that autism and other neurological variation from some assumed norm are part of the natural variation among people, do not require medical cures or interventions, and should be accepted and valued as ways of being (McLennan et al., 2025).

The location of the neurodiversity movement in relation to other representations is contested. McLennan et al. (2025) claims there appears to be a consensus that "the neurodiversity paradigm contrasts with a medical model of disability … there is more debate about which disability model/s the neurodiversity framework best aligns." (p. 2). While "many claim that the neurodiversity movement simply supports the social model of disability and opposes the medical model" there remains some objections to the way the social model separates impairment from disability (S. K. Kapp, 2020, p. 7). McLennan et al. (2025) concurs, noting "It is not a consensus opinion, however, that the neurodiversity paradigm aligns exactly with the social model of disability." (p. 3). Chapman (2020) points out that there is a disconnect between

the neurodiversity paradigm's argument that diversity is natural and how "to be considered impaired, you must be impaired in relation to something that is considered unimpaired. … For holding diversity itself to be the norm does not seem compatible with holding the average to be the norm. This means that the neurodiversity paradigm is at odds with the concept of impairment as relied on for the social model." (p. 63). Dwyer (2022) suggests a middle ground between the social and medical model, drawing on the social-relational model. This model suggests "that "disability" arising from society coexists with restrictions arising directly from individual "impairment/reduced function" (Dwyer, 2022, p. 76). However, this model retains the social model's term "impairment" and risks "implying that neurodivergence is synonymous with impairment/reduced function." (Dwyer, 2022, p. 76). McLennan et al. (2025) makes the point that "Regardless of the disability model applied to the neurodiversity paradigm, there appears one area of relative consensus across the neurodiversity field in relation to the framing of disability supports. That is, supports should be designed to assist people, not cure or normalise them." (p. 11). This is a key takeaway from the debates on how to best categorize the neurodiversity movement: while there are arguments as to the accuracy of the term "impairment", the extent to which social barriers could realistically be removed, or the harm caused by discussions of cures, most autistic people want to be able to exist as they are with funding and research being used to improve their quality of life and not to normalize them.

Representations of Autism: The Construction of Self and Looping Kinds

When autistic people are framed as disordered, abnormal, or different though pathologizing language they are reduced to a diagnostic category, their value as a person is stripped away (Hodge et al., 2019). Negotiating the disabling barriers of the educational system put additional demands on them that drain physical and emotional resources and they

"consciously and unconsciously internalise the messages contained within oppressive attitudes and practices that are prevalent and insidious within society", thinking of themselves as the source of the problem instead of blaming the barriers created by societal structures and systems (Hodge et al., 2019, p. 1354). They can then come to see themselves as "alien and unworthy" (Hodge et al., 2019, pp. 1354–1355). Hodge et al. (2019) defines the sense of self as incorporating both how one defines oneself and the value "they attribute to who and how they are as a person" and notes that while construction of the autistic self is a vital concept there is a lack of research on it (Hodge et al., 2019, pp. 1355–1356). Interventions for autistic students are often designed to normalize the self and force the child to reduce or eliminate any behaviours that reveal them as autistic, masking attributes that mark them as different and encouraging them to pass as nonautistic (Hodge et al., 2019). These interventions offer few, if any, opportunities for the autistic person to "define their own understandings of autism, their relationship to it and how they want to present themselves to others." (Hodge et al., 2019, p. 1367).

Hacking (1999), in his discussion of how things become socially constructed, claimed that once a label is created – such as an 'autistic student' – they become established as a specific "*kind*" of species (p. 27, italics in original). He notes that children are self-aware creatures and know when they have been made into a different kind, taking in that identity and becoming, in their own self-consciousness, autistic students. Additionally, an autistic student (the kind, not an individual) "is not only a kind of person. It is a legal entity, and more importantly a paralegal one, used by boards, schools, social workers, activists" (Hacking, 1999, p. 31). Unlike classifications in the natural science, with classifications in the social sciences there can be conscious interactions between kinds and individual people – an autistic student "(as a kind of classification) can be called an *interactive kind* because it interacts with things of that kind,

namely people, including individual autistic students, "who can become aware of how they are classified and modify their behaviour accordingly" (p. 32, 103 italics in original). Hacking refers to this as the "*looping effect of human kinds*" (p. 34, italics in original). Beyond the looping effect, the interactions that occur in the larger matrix of institutions and practices surrounding a classification also can modify or replace that classification. Hacking is concerned with classifications that, when known by those so classified or those around them, "and put to work in institutions, change the way individuals experience themselves – and may even lead people to evolve their feelings and behaviour in part because they are so classified." (p. 104). Hacking also introduces the idea of *indifferent* or natural kinds: a contrast to interactive kinds for those that do not interact with its classification (p. 105, italics in original). He argues that autism is both an interactive and an indifferent kind, because while autistics interact with their classification, the source of their autism does not respond to being classified (Hacking, 1999, p. 121).

Autism is not just one process, one body-mind preformed in a single way, as this brief overview of some representations shows. While the social model allows for positive interpretations of what being autistic means, representations of autistic students as difficult, in need of recovery, or as victims of deficits create an autistic student who is less than other students, and who can and will internalize these representations, with the looping effect acting as a self-fulling prophecy. How then can inclusive education open space for positive models of autism such that both student and educator can co-create a positive learning environment?

Chapter 3 How are autistic students understood?

The focus of this research project is improving the educational experiences of autistic students, and to understand why that needs to be done it is necessary to see how those experiences, and those individuals, are understood.

Deficit Views

In this view, autistic students are defined in terms of their deficits, seen through a model that casts any variance from the norm as disruptive to the social order (Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2009). Autism is described by comparison to potentially fatal conditions, for example: “Autism is a disorder that affects more children than juvenile diabetes, childhood cancer, and paediatric AIDS combined each year.” (Flood et al., 2013, p. 121). These children reportedly ‘suffer’ with difficulties in social interactions with others, eye contact, verbal and non-verbal communication, sensory sensitivities, stereotypic behaviours, executive functioning, and focusing on a single interest to the exclusion of all others (Carrington et al., 2020; Hillier et al., 2021). As a result, these students experience negative impacts on school engagement and participation (Carrington et al., 2020) and they are “particularly vulnerable to anxiety, social isolation, and depression in an academic setting” (Hillier et al., 2021, p. 90).

Positive Views

Research, such as that noted above, often position autism as a “neurological disorder, a pathological deviance from expected functional stages of development” (Milton, 2012, p. 883) but this is not the only way to view autism. Milton (2012) argues against a definition of autism that compares differences in sociality, produced by a difference in neurology, against an

"idealised normative view of social reality" (2012, p. 886). Wood (2019) suggests that there is a "strength-based" way of viewing autism, where "pejorative framings" of obsessiveness and intractability are replaced with positive framings such as 'motivated' and 'determined' (p. 16). From this perspective, the difficulties for autistic students are not because of a lack of aptitude, but instead the result of a "poor fit with established schooling norms" (Hillier et al., 2021, p. 91).

Educator Views

Meindl et al. (2020) reported that traditional ways of motivating students to "maintain appropriate academic behaviors" (e.g., praise or marks) are less effective (Meindl et al., 2020, p. 4) and that tasks that fail to hold their interests (e.g., repetitive tasks, busy work) can result in refusals to participate or disruptive behaviour (Meindl et al., 2020). A consequence of this difficulty in keeping autistic students engaged is the lowing of expectations of what they are capable of. Hodges et al. (2020) reported that teachers and parents felt the academic expectations of autistic students were lower than that of their typically developing peers. The 'solution' to this problem is more often than not a 'treatment programme' designed to modify the autistic student to properly 'fit in' to the "mainstream culture of society" (Milton, 2012, pp. 883–884).

The Double Empathy Problem

Milton's (2012) 'double empathy problem' hypothesises that there is a difference between autistic and non-autistic culture, and that while autistic people are expected to learn to function in non-autistic culture, there is no reciprocity (p. 886). Chown (2014) has his own take on the "ontological status of autism" and disagrees with Milton's implication that an 'autistic society' exists (Chown thinks evidence of such a society was "probably unintentional"), but agrees that, in general, autistic people achieve greater insight into mainstream society than non-

autistic people do into autism (pp. 1672-1673). While they are willing to admit that "autistic people have an affinity with other autistic people which non-autistic people do not have" they find it unlikely that autistics understand each other as well as non-autistics understand other non-autistics (Chown, 2014, p. 1673). Finding a way for non-autistic educators to understand the needs of autistic students is important because the number of autistic students in mainstream classes is increasing. One study found that in 2002, 24.7% of autistic students spent up to 79% of their day in a regular classroom, but by 2015, 62.5% were spending more than 80% of they day in such classrooms (Meindl et al., 2020, p. 1). There are no experimental studies that show any educational benefit to segregated classrooms for disabled students (Gee et al., 2020) and in fact research shows that such students perform better in inclusive classes (Cole et al., 2021).

Inclusive Education

Before discussing inclusive education, it is necessary to look at the various ways it has been defined in the literature. Goodley et al. (2020) understands inclusive education as "full participation of disabled people in education, throughout the life course, from early years, compulsory schooling into university education and vocational training and lifelong learning." (p. 522). They further argue that co-locating a special unit for disabled children in or attached to a school, while a preferred model in British schools, does not meet their expectations for inclusion because one of the goals of inclusive education is to "fundamentally radicalise" how the school system is organized, and this model only creates two parallel systems that do not affect each other (Goodley et al., 2020, pp. 522–523). Meindl et al. (2020) explains the importance of having disabled and non-disabled students in the same class as a way to expose autistic students to stimulating environments to help develop social skills and problem solving strategies, while at the same time giving non-disabled students a chance "to engage in behaviors

of acceptance, respect, and appreciation for diversity" (p. 1). Hodge et al. (2019) notes that while school is imagined as a site of change, it is only the disabled students who are expected to change or self-regulate "into something less autistic, whilst the disabling systems and structures of education may be observed and regretted but are, for the most part, left undisturbed." (p. 1369). Inclusion is not just being present in the classroom, but requires "being actively engaged in activities, tasks and routines that are typical for students of that age in a given education system, as well as a subjective feeling of belonging to, and being active in the school environment." (Hodges et al., 2020, p. 2). Van Der Steen et al. (2020) argues that this level of inclusion is not possible for autistic students. They claim that autistics do not achieve the same academic outcomes as their peers, their social and communication difficulties prevent them from accessing educator support, they lack the ability to engage in higher-level language processing, they have impaired executive functioning preventing them from focusing, maintaining attention, managing their time, and monitoring or correcting themselves, they are too easily distracted to engage in independent class activities, often demonstrate off-task behaviour, and "may show stereotyped behavior and fixated interests, which could cause social isolation." (pp. 1-2). However, some researchers dispute viewing inclusion as a specific intervention done for an individual or group instead of "a right of access or value according to which people in schools invent and re-organize practice." (Baglieri, 2020, p. 44). Baglieri (2020) notes there are two conceptions of inclusion: as a way to interrupt ableism and racism by protecting disabled peoples' equal access to school; or as a series of interventions performed on labeled students to force them to assimilate "into normative performances of compliance and school achievement" which does nothing to deconstruct the problems inherent in ability/disability binary (Baglieri, 2020, p. 45). The existence of this binary is the reason accommodations are necessary: if the

education system were inclusive, using teaching and assessment methods that were flexible enough for all students to participate, then accommodations would not be required for some students (Lord, 2020). Accommodation is an individual response to the failure of an inclusive group setting. This concept is inherently political because it calls on educators to resist some of the neoliberal demands to foster self-reliance (Ignagni et al., 2019).

The neoliberal nature of public education mandates the consideration of cost when it comes to the education of disabled students. Austerity measures have become the main philosophy of governments, resulting in the striping of support for disabled people and their families (Goodley et al., 2020). Ignagni et al. (2019) refers to this as the "neoliberal discourse of disability as excessive demand." (p. 307). However, it is not correct that an inclusive education system is more expensive than one that excludes disabled students – using neoliberal logic inclusive systems have been found to be less expensive once higher participation in the workforce by disabled graduate of the system are factored in (Lord, 2020). The legal requirements for inclusive education that exist are effectively meaningless when the funding to implement inclusivity is refused, preventing implementation, and demonstrating government disinterest (Lord, 2020). Government policies that require inclusion, but do not come with the extra resources to facilitate it, provide no flexibility for educators to alter a prescriptive education system to accommodate autistic students and forces teachers to temper their approach to meet the demands of the curriculum (Wood, 2019, p. 15). In the face of this intractability, educators often try to foster a sense of resilience, a "positive adaptation in the face of adversity" that serves as a "disciplinary technology, driving our attention to individual coping and adjustment practices and away from structured economic and social injustice" (Ignagni et al., 2019, pp. 298–299).

Autistic Students and Inclusive Education

Education, like any social arrangement, locally reproduces/follows "supremacist, ableist, heteropatriarchal, classist and neocolonialist power relations" that "anticipate and welcome body-minds" that fit the normative ideal (Ignagni et al., 2019, p. 299). When access is not anticipated for autistic students the labour of making the classroom "accessible, functional, safer, and welcoming" falls predominately on the student (Ignagni et al., 2019, p. 301). The added strain of this labour is then often misinterpreted (or, less generously, misrepresented) by researchers (e.g., Fage et al., 2019) as hampering their inclusion "because they struggle to manage emotions and maintain control of behaviors" (p. 1). These researchers do not acknowledge the added effort being demanded of the student and instead assume poor emotional self-regulation when students are asked to adapt their "behavioral responses to socio-environmental contexts" that are unfavorable for them (p. 1). Educators, too, often do not see the challenges autistic students face because "otherwise highly functioning[1]" students may have invisible needs that are not being met, with negative consequences for their ability to participate (Young et al., 2017, p. 1). Baglieri (2020) labels "pedagogical practices that devalue non-normative ways of living and learning" as disablement, which subjects disabled students to increased evaluation and surveillance, and that is then used to 'show' their failure to thrive in a mainstream school setting as proof of disability (p. 44). This is how disability works in education: students are disabled for and through schools, to enforce "cultural practices of domination and subjugation" (Baglieri, 2020, p. 44). When educators see autistic students only in terms of how they do not fit into the classroom there is a pervasive effect on educator perception of disabled students – educators are more likely to find them hard to include and to consider

[1] Note that the use of "functioning labels" is discouraged by autistics.

them a burden, creating further barriers to inclusive education (Lord, 2020). This is unfortunate as including autistic students in mainstream classroom settings gives them the opportunity to interact with their typically developing peers, potentially leading to positive social outcomes for both parties – the autistic students become more integrated into the environment and the non-autistic students see their autistic classmates as capable and belonging (Kisbu-Sakarya & Doenyas, 2021). There exists contention in the fields of disability studies in education and critical special education: can improvement in educating disabled students come from better special education services, such as inclusion, or can inclusivity only come from a "radical reconstruction of schools' approach to disability" (Baglieri, 2020, p. 42). This sets up a false dichotomy where the only options are to try doing more of what is currently being done or redesign the education system (as it pertains to disability) from scratch. The first is practical, but unlikely to be effective, while the second is more likely to be effective but far less likely to occur – change in schooling is slow and methodological, rarely radical. In the interim, "the questions of how well educational policies that name inclusivity as an aim are carried out in the field of practice and why Black and Brown children access inclusion at lower rates than White children are critical areas being examined." (Baglieri, 2020, p. 42).

Information on the lived experience of autistic high school students is limited, though there has been some research on this topic. Zakai-Mashiach (2025) notes that most of this research focused on the perspectives of other "stakeholders" such as parents and teachers, with a smaller number of first-person studies. They noted that these studies usually looked at sections of the educational journey, rarely the entire 12 (or more) year long continuum. They argue that the research on autistics in "general school settings" (as opposed to segregated schools) "has revealed mainly negative experiences and has indicated that most autistic children are at risk of

negative encounters such as bullying, anxiety, social isolation and loneliness" (p. 2). Lebenhagen (2024) notes that there are multiple reasons why attempts at inclusive education fail: inadequate teacher training, medical model influences on government language, and neo-liberal trends towards individuality. They also argue that inclusive education discourse is complicated by "assertions from critical disability theorists that while the objective of integration may strive to create a more inclusive society, integration is a modern form of oppression because it aims to purify and normalize through assimilation" (p. 14). Zakai-Mashiach (2025) would appear to agree, noting that "No studies have been found that describe the lived experiences of autistic students in general schools as positive and empowering." (p. 2). At issue here is the difference between integration and inclusion. As my colleagues and I wrote in Barron et al. (2024) "inclusive education extends beyond mere integration to include an emphasis on creating a culture of inclusion, de-stigmatizing disability, as well as valuing and presuming the competence of all students" (p. 49). What we called "mere integration" is what Lebenhagen (2024) is referring to above – putting autistic students in regular classes without the necessary accommodations and supports. Naraian (2011, 2020, 2021) examines how inclusion can be created without falling into assimilation, where the included student is expected to take on the role of a non-disabled student. Naraian (2011) argues that teachers who are thoughtful and deliberate in their efforts "contribute significantly to making nonnormative behaviors and actions accessible" to their class to help disabled students bond with their peers. "This, in turn, can stimulate the creation of alternative norms—an activity that lies at the heart of inclusive efforts." (p. 259). Naraian (2021) assumes that 'inclusive' education must lie somewhere other than within the divided school tracks and scholarship of 'general education' and 'special education' while "the practice of 'inclusive' education may inevitably encompass both 'general' and 'special'

education" (p. 299). However, as Ashby (2012) reminds us, "The separation between general and special education is neither natural nor inevitable." (p. 98). They encourage the use of disability studies to engage in critical thinking about what education for all students can be and a way to reorient the goal of special education from "remediating supposed defects" to educational success (p. 96). Their argument, that disability studies is not a replacement for special education, but a way to rethink what education means, also requires a change in who is defined as an expert. They write that the way most of the research on disability is done centers "so-called scholars and experts on disability" while marginalizing disabled people, and fails to "learn from the individual, not about the individual." (p. 95).

Research On Autism

Research with autistic participants has all the challenges that any research does, but also complications unique to working with autistic people and their needs. For example, when working with autistic people to create accessible survey instruments Nicolaidis et al.'s (2015) participants advised against survey questions that are unspecific, vague, or imprecise, such as yes/no questions because they feel "strongly that this would make it harder to understand the items because they would not know how to respond if something did not happen all or none of the time." (Nicolaidis et al., 2015, p. 165). Autistic research participants may also have different communication preferences, such as hating phone calls (Howard & Sedgewick, 2021). Nicolaidis et al. (2011) used text for communications, and found that this was a challenge for the non-autistic members, "but the experience has also helped to increase empathy for what it is like to have to communicate in a non-preferred mode. We have learned to provide accommodations (e.g., telephone calls) for some of our non-autistic team members." (Nicolaidis et al., 2011, p. 147). Autistic have reported being uncomfortable with a majority rules (e.g., voting) method for

decision making and so found alternatives, such as the "five finger method for making decisions or reaching consensus" (Nicolaidis et al., 2011, p. 148).

Nicolaidis et al.'s (2011, 2015, 2019) studies are also of note because they attempted to use autistic participants and not proxies as much as possible. They note the serious ethical and scientific validity concerns (2019, p. 2008) this presents. There are an uncountable number of published studies that ignore these concerns. In one case, in a study of alternative and augmentative communication devices (AAC), the research had two PhD student demonstrate three devices as follows:

> We created a 90-s video clip showing a female non-disabled adult (i.e., the speaker) using an SGD [speech generating device], then using MS [manual signing], and then using PE [picture exchange]. In each case, the speaker used the AAC system to request a preferred item from a second female and nondisabled adult (i.e., the listener). (Achmadi et al., 2015, p. 23)

These videos were then shown to undergraduate students who rated the three methods on several categories including "This AAC system would not draw undue negative attention to the user … I would choose to use this AAC mode if I were unable to speak … I would prefer my child to use this AAC system.)." (Achmadi et al., 2015, p. 23). Other such research includes having non-disabled children design AAC devices for disabled children (Light et al., 2007) or asking the parents of college bound autistics about their children's needs, rather than the children themselves (Hillier et al., 2021). Other researchers have found that many studies on autism have undeclared conflicts of interest (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Bottema-Beutel & Crowley, 2021), fail to follow up on potential harms (Bottema et al., 2023; Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Dawson & Fletcher-Watson, 2021), or are potentially unethical (Botha et al., 2021).

Education specific research likewise can display these shortcomings. For example, O'Rourke et al. (2023) used co-design to develop a communications app to increase "collaboration between stakeholders" (p. 579) at the secondary school level. The co-design team was comprised of "parents of students with autism, allied health professionals who worked with students with autism, classroom educators and administrators who worked in inclusive schools [schools that provide for the needs of all students in their communities, whatever the level of ability, disability or educational need], and pre-service professionals all of whom had completed compulsory units on inclusive school practices, or delivery of health services to individuals with autism." (p. 584). Despite the autistic students being at the secondary school level and taking mainstream classes, they were not considered a stakeholder in communication and collaboration about them. Likewise, Nordin et al.'s (2024) scoping review on autistic student absenteeism "was mainly based on parent reports or school attendance data. Only a few studies included information provided by the children themselves" (p. 1626).

Expertise

In his 2014 book *Are We All Scientific Experts Now?* Harry Collins argues that there are laypeople who are medical experts, such as people with chronic illnesses who may know more about their illness and its treatments than their doctors (Collins, 2014). By the same logic, autistics are experts – Collins uses the term 'experience-based experts' – on autism. He considers that form of expertise to be part of a group he calls 'contributory experts': those who gain their expertise by working with other contributory experts and picking up their skills, techniques, and tacit knowledge – a form of apprenticeship (Collins, 2014). The expertise of autistic people, who have learned how to create the micro-activist affordances (see below) necessary to navigate a world not designed for the way their brains work, is very different from that of academics who

study autism but have limited interactions with autistics. Collins calls expertise based on academic study ‘primary source knowledge’ and notes that this form of expertise is entirely reliant on ubiquitous knowledge and is separated by a large gulf from the contributory knowledge of autistics (Collins, 2014). Collins separates the two with what he calls ‘interactional expertise’, the level one can reach by interacting with expert communities but not being involved in, or contributing to, the practical activities of that community (Collins, 2014).. This level of expertise is where most of what happens in science is done (Collins, 2014).. However, for autism research to attain this level of expertise they would need to interact with autistics as something other than research subjects. Loughran (2020) noted that much of autism research treats autistics as “little more than passive study participants or recipients of treatment." (p. 2). This is why researchers could publish papers that found such obvious results as “autistic people can have, maintain, and value close romantic relationships and friendships.” (Loughran, 2020, p. 2). After being told that her ability to speak meant she was not like the autistics they studied, Loughran noted that "[i]f a person's ability to converse with you makes you assume she is not like 'real autistics,' then your idea of autism is automatically going to be 'people who can't talk to me.'" (Loughran, 2020, p. 3). Collins points out that to reach the level of interactional expertise requires “long immersion in the community” and not just casual interactions with members (Collins, 2014, p. 73). Though talking about such self-proclaimed experts as anti-vaccine activists, he considers people whose sole source of knowledge is their own reading of primary sources to be dangerous (Collins, 2014). While they have primary source knowledge and give the impression of expertise, they do not have the interactional expertise acquired by being part of the community of contributary experts (Collins, 2014). How are they dangerous? They think that because they have the academic knowledge of a subject, they are more qualified to made

decisions on that subject than people in that community. When applied to autism researchers this can be seen in funded research designed to determine if autistic people daydream (Kennedy et al., 2006), value friendship (Sedgewick et al., 2019), or have very male faces (Tan et al., 2017).

Dokumaci (2018) describes the "ableist habitus" that normally "disappears in everydayness" as the way in which some possibilities are made unthinkable because of what already has been actualized (Dokumaci, 2018, pp. 1, 3). The result is that environmental affordances are accessible to some bodies, but others must design micro-activist affordances to work around barriers (Dokumaci, 2018). She argues that accessibility should not be treated as an add-on or an afterthought but should be treated as a creative device (Dokumaci, 2018). She also notes that access is not a monolith, but "a multitude of meanings and valances that may not always neatly cohere" (Dokumaci, 2018, p. 2). If there is no single form of accessibility, then how can anyone be an expert on accessibility? Her answer is that any disabled person is a "sophisticated lay scientist" who makes use of "indigenous practices" to survive in a world not made for them (Dokumaci, 2018, p. 3). That the world is not made for non-standard bodies is the core of her idea of the habitus of ableism – a "preferred social body" is assumed, yet invisible, until the appearance of a non-standard body (Dokumaci, 2018). Her technique of using disability as method is to use this appearance of a non-standard body to "mark what otherwise goes unmarked" in daily life (Dokumaci, 2018, p. 3). Patriarchy, racism, colonialism, sexism, and ableism created a world of approved bodies and scholars in feminist studies, race studies, disability studies, mad studies, and queer studies question how a "seemingly neutral world of supports affords the normate body, while putting other bodies out of place." (Dokumaci, 2018, p. 3). Because of the invisibility of this displacement, it is hard for bodies that are not displaced to be experts on how to create affordances for those non-normative bodies.

Historically, knowledge of autism came from the observations of parents and medical professionals who did not have the lived experience of being autistic (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). They looked at their autistic patients as personally deficient because they could not fit into the place held for normative bodies. The deficit and behavior-based diagnosis criteria places the blame on the individual for their communication problems instead of considering how interpersonal interactions and social factors create barriers for autistic integration (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Autistics often make use of repetitive body movements to self-regulate or deal with sensitivities to stimulation, but this is often misunderstood by non-autistics. In two different studies cited by Gillespie-Lynch et al. participants expressed that they “felt that only autistic people could truly understand autism” and that "everybody is an expert bar the person with a diagnosis." (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017, p. 2). The respondents noted, however, that any autistic person is only an expert on their own situation, and not on autism in general (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). What would it mean for autistics to be treated as experts on their own diagnosis? The authors argue that if the work autistics did in building on the insights gained from their lived experience was acknowledged it would encourage more meaningful participation in research and intervention design by autistics which would lead to better alignment with their needs and interests (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Part of this misalignment is that “researchers often interpret neutral and even positive differences as deficits” while autistics positively reframe many of these differences as strengths (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017, p. 2). Many autistics subscribe to the neurodiversity model, which challenges the medical model of disability. The medical model sees autism as an impairment present in the individual that requires treatment to normalize the body, while the neurodiversity movement emphasizes the positive and rejects attempts as normalization or cure (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Milton, 2014). The authors

findings support the idea that autistics' lived experience make them experts on autism, and they are less likely than non-autistics to view autism with the deficit-based medical model (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Despite research showing the importance of including lived-experience experts in research, they tend to be the least listened to (Jackson-Perry, 2024; Milton, 2014). Academics treated as experts often lack Collins' interactional expertise, which "should be seen as a basic standard for social scientific research." (Milton, 2014, p. 796). While expertise on autism has been claimed by many different groups (academics, parents, practitioners, therapists) autistics have been traditionally silenced (Milton, 2014). For examples in education where non-autistic voices dominated the conversation, see, for example, O'Rourke et al. (2023) and Nordin et al. (2024).

Chapter 4 Theoretical Frameworks

Activist affordances

In her book, *Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Habitable Worlds* (2023), Arseli Dokumaci proposes the theory of activist affordances as a way to identify the methods and results of disabled people engaging in unseen work to exist in spaces not designed for or anticipating their presence. This work extends her earlier paper, Disability as Method: Interventions in the Habitus of Ableism through Media-Creation (2018), which was foundational in the design of this project, as explained below.

To understand Dokumaci's (2023) theory we must start with she claims an affordance is. She describes them as "material, relational, and emergent" but also "objective and invariant" because they exist regardless of if they are being perceived or not (p. 17). They are "possibilities of action whose actualization depends upon the complementarity between the organism and its environment" which she explains means that an "animal cannot perceive what is not already there, but what is there does not become an affordance until the animal perceives it as such. An affordance becomes perceivable as such only through this *mutuality* between the environment and the animal." (p. 35, emphasis in original). However, because the affordance is created by the relationship between the animal and the environment *at that time*, it remains emergent and not predetermined. She argues that affordances are not only relational, but ontological, because "ontology is determined by the perception of affordance, and affordances *are* the ontology of a given organism-environment relation." (Dokumacı, 2023, p. 43, emphasis in original).

Dokumaci (2023) notes that there is no difference between physical and social affordances, as "there are no physical properties that are not already saturated with social properties (ownability or not), and there is no social property that can be perceived without

material properties (ownability *of* something)." (Dokumacı, 2023, p. 45, emphasis in original). As a results of all affordances possessing social properties, they are learned through education, including what she terms "mutual affordances" – those between two people – which are "evolutionary and socially conditioned reciprocal behaviors" that include "social—communicative, sexual, and economic—ones." (p. 42). However, Dokumaci found that when using this theory of affordances to examine disability, there needs to be an accounting for "actions and behaviors that take place yet correspond to affordances whose possible behaviors or actions require enormous amounts of *effort*, *endurance*, and *ingenuity* to be realized by impaired humans." (p. 51, emphasis in original). Because a disabled person cannot make use of every available affordance she needs to "account for all of the labor, effort, endurance, and ingenuity, that sometimes include collaboration—that these affordances require to be perceivable at all." (p. 51). This is because the original theory of affordances does not consider the amount of time, effort, labour, or creativity required to actualize an affordance, so she suggests understanding affordances "in *processual* and comparative terms." (p. 52, emphasis in original). That is to say, asking "what affordances are available to a disabled person *as compared* to the affordances of her non- or less-disabled coinhabitants in a particular place at a specific point in time?" (Dokumacı, 2023, p. 52, emphasis in original).

In explaining what activist affordances are, Dokumaci (2023) describes them as being "about *how to build worlds with acts* (rather than with words and slogans)" (p.5, emphasis in original) because, she claims, it is not people who change the world, but their actions. This activism, which she describes as an act of world-building, does not ask for change, but brings it into being by "*making up* and *making real* worlds that we were not readily given by *making do*

with what we have" (p. 9, emphasis in original). Through connecting disability, affordances, and performance she proposes

> the theory of activist affordances in order to name and recognize the tiny, everyday artful battles of disabled people for more livable worlds that otherwise remain unaccounted for. I propose the concept of "activist affordances" as a way to understand how disabled people literally *make up* whatever affordances fail to readily materialize in their environments (or otherwise be immediately available for perception) and at the same time must *make up for* that failure. (Dokumacı, 2023, p. 6)

Dokumaci (2023) explains this failure of affordances to materialize as the result of a mismatch between the expected able body and the existing disabled one. She claims that a disabled body cannot perceive an affordance unless it was expecting that specific body, but the normalizing force of the able/general/universal body prevents that. She calls this normalized expectation "the habitus of ableism" (Dokumacı, 2023, p. 59). She further explains that this is a social construction, that as "the privileged category in a social hierarchy, the able body is marked by its ease and the ways in which this ease appears to be simply given, rather than something that is actually a historically and socially conditioned attribute." (Dokumacı, 2023, p. 59). Slater (2024) calls such "collective affects that often exist in inchoate forms, discernible in cultural texts, but unspoken in official discourse" *structures of feeling* (p. 42). This social conditioning of how the environment is *supposed* to interact with people (the affordances it offers) forecloses the possibility of other ways of interacting. Dokumaci explains that "the characteristics of the habitus fashioned by affordances actualized by those who came before us come to appear as facts, necessities, and urgencies of life because they appear to be the only ones in existence at all, when in reality there may be (and have been) any number of others." (p. 77). Thus, she contends,

history and culture created able-bodiedness and "define *which* affordances of the world will be utilized, *how*, and to the benefit of *whom*." (p. 77, emphasis in original).

Dokumaci (2023) points out that all affordances are always in the environment regardless if they are being perceived or not, and so too are the activist affordances. However, they "are the most remote and the most unlikely ones to be perceived, because the ableist habitus has pushed them to the extremities of the possible and the plausible." (p. 104). She explains,

> Because the perception of affordances and the behavior that gives rise to them are not separate, and not even simultaneous, but actually one action, I call this bringing into being a *performance of world-building*, and the world it brings into being, "activist affordances." I define activist affordances as the micro, ephemeral, and performative acts/arts of world-making with which disabled people must literally *make up*, and at the same time *make up for*, whatever affordances fail to readily materialize in their environments and their remoteness to perception. Activist affordances are also "micro" in the sense that they are tiny, modest, and humble. They are "ephemeral" in the sense that they are fleeting, nondiscursive, and not materializable in final enduring forms. They are "performative" in the sense that they do not already exist in the environment, like standard affordances, but *come into being as* they give rise to absent but necessary or desirable actions that enact worlds. Finally, activist affordances are activist in the sense that an activist perception/ action produces them. The "activism" of activist affordances accounts precisely for this performativity of perception/action that unearths these otherwise submerged or subjugated affordances. (Dokumacı, 2023, p. 104)

But why are these activist affordances necessary? Because, she explains, disability makes the use of existing affordances difficult or painful, shrinking what affordances are available. The person then must find an affordance they can use, balancing it's positive and negative aspects.

Dokumaci (2023) rejects the use of the social model / medical model binary to locate where disability exists. Instead, she focuses on how disability is experienced as "the constraining, diminishing, and at times complete deprivation of available affordances." (p. 32). She calls this concept shrinkage because of the way the pool of existing affordances shrinks based on the individual's impairment. In her research she found that when her participants' rheumatoid arthritis flared up, their environments shrank, and they had to create activist affordances to compensate. She also noticed that when "the environment and its existing set of affordances shrink, time expands, conversely" (p. 229), so that as the number of affordances shrunk, the amount of time it took to complete a task increased. She connected this with the concept of crip time (Kafer, 2019), an acknowledgement that expectations of how long it takes to complete a task assume a specific type of person. At the same time, Dokumaci notes that some of these activist affordances are created despite the pain they cause the user. She argues that these actions may either serve "'compulsory-ablebodiedness'—the cultural assumption that able-bodied identity is the default position that we all prefer to occupy" (p. 192) or "compulsory nostalgia" (p. 188) where a person's abilities before becoming disabled define them. In such cases

> internalized ableism overrode feelings of pain, soreness, limitation. It took precedence over what the physical properties of the body and the environment could actually afford for each other. It led less to the alleviation of pain and accommodation of impairment

than to the apparent realization of an ideal (read: normative) able-bodied self. (Dokumacı, 2023, p. 188)

The concept of shrinkage is intended to acknowledge that no matter the amount of support a disabled person receives, there is a finite limit to the number of environmental adjustments that can be offered, and solutions that assist one person might not assist another (or even disadvantage them). Understanding that everyone must deal with their own "*limits*, *losses*, and *shrinkage*" (p. 69, emphasis in original) adds nuance to how disability is understood.

Dokumaci (2023) uses theatrical or dramatic performance as a way to understand how activist affordances are brought into being. She argues "that whether it takes place on stage or in everyday life, performance allows us to perceive the environment **as if** it were a someplace else that already provides the affordances that we need, desire, and wish for." (p. 8, emphasis in original). She further extends this to include approaches like critical design and speculative design, claiming they use a "what if?" framework that is "similar to the subjunctive (**as if**) mood of performance." (p. 9, emphasis in original). In her theory, "performance is what allows us to *make up* and *make real* activist affordances. Therefore, activist affordances never culminate in a final form. Instead, they remain in movement toward the forms that they are yet to take. So do the accessible futures whose contours they draw." (p. 203, emphasis in original). This allows for experimentation, improvisation, failure, and trying again. While activist affordances are ephemeral, they can be stored in a "disability repertoire", "the embodied, nondiscursive, and nonverbal knowledge and memory that activist affordances generate." (p. 228). She assigns three aspects to disability repertoires: "First, a disability repertoire refers to the persistence of activist affordances over time. Second, a disability repertoire makes a disabled life livable. Third, it makes its livability transferable to others." (p. 228). They also provide "the potential to forge a

community" (p. 236) as disabled people share their repertoires and learn from each other. Other researchers have examined community building in relation to speculative fiction and theater (Gallagher et al., 2024).

Disability Studies as Method

Schalk (2017), following Minich (2016), understands critical disability studies as many things at once – method, approach, theoretical framework, and perspective. Minich (2016) asks how a scholar can claim to be "doing disability studies" if they are not considering "how attendance policies, seating arrangements, assignments, lighting, and mode of instruction" affect the accessibility of the classroom environment (p. 4). In her paper "Disability as Method: Interventions in the Habitus of Ableism through Media-Creation" Dokumaci (2018) likewise used disability as a means of theorizing about accessibility, describing the micro-activist affordances disabled people employ to move through spaces that were created without expecting their non-normative bodyminds. Here bodyminds is used in the way Schalk (2018) described it, reliant on the "inextricability of mind and body" (p. 5). Dokumaci (2023) expands on this, describing disability as method as a creative approach where "research methods are informed by, modeled after, and tailored to the situated knowledges of disabled people" by "attuning and sculpting research methods and modes of analysis to the particular ways of relating to the world that disabled living entails." (p. 11). Through what Dokumaci (2018) calls "the habitus of ableism" these micro-activist affordances are hidden from those for whom the presence of unexpected bodyminds is improbable or unthinkable. At the same time, these non-normative bodyminds risk stigmatization if their affordances are detected. Goffman (1986) asks, "does the stigmatized individual assume his differentness is known about already or is evident on the spot, or does he assume it is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by

them?" (p. 13). If the individual can hide their micro-activist affordances and seem to fit into their environment it may be possible to avoid the stigma of their disability, but in other cases the tools necessary to exist in that environment (e.g., a wheelchair) may be the source of the stigma. Dokumaci (2023) uses this approach to break the medical / social model binary, arguing that if disability is located *somewhere* (emphasis hers) then there needs to be boundaries and policing of those boundaries, but by treating critical disability studies as a methodology disability is not a site of firm definitions, but of questions. This ties into her concept of shrinkage which "shifts our focus from objects/subjects to processes and comparisons" (p. 53). Through the avoiding of firm boundaries on the bodymind as the source of disability we can better understand the processes that disable.

Chapter 5 Method

Overview

For any student there are innumerable stressors impacting them daily. However, for autistic students, the impact of one or more of those stressors can be disabling. This is a social model view but is also in alignment with the neurodiversity paradigm: that but for the stressor the student would not be at some kind of disadvantage. Minich (2016) mentions stressors such as seating arrangements or lights, as well as structural requirements like attendance policies that act to make schools less accessible for some students. To learn more about how students coped, adapted, overcame, or survived stressors I looked to learn from lived experience.

In this project I recruited four autistic people (details below) to engage in a limited form of community based participatory research (see below for more details). Ideally in CBPR the participants (members of the community being studied) would decide on the research question and the methods, but for a doctoral project that requires approval before enlisting participants this is not a viable approach. Instead, while the question and methods were pre-selected the world building activity granted participants full control within the confines of creating a fictional future. The project was composed of three separate activities where the results were interpreted together and used to inform the discussion (see figure 1).

Figure 1

Connections between strands

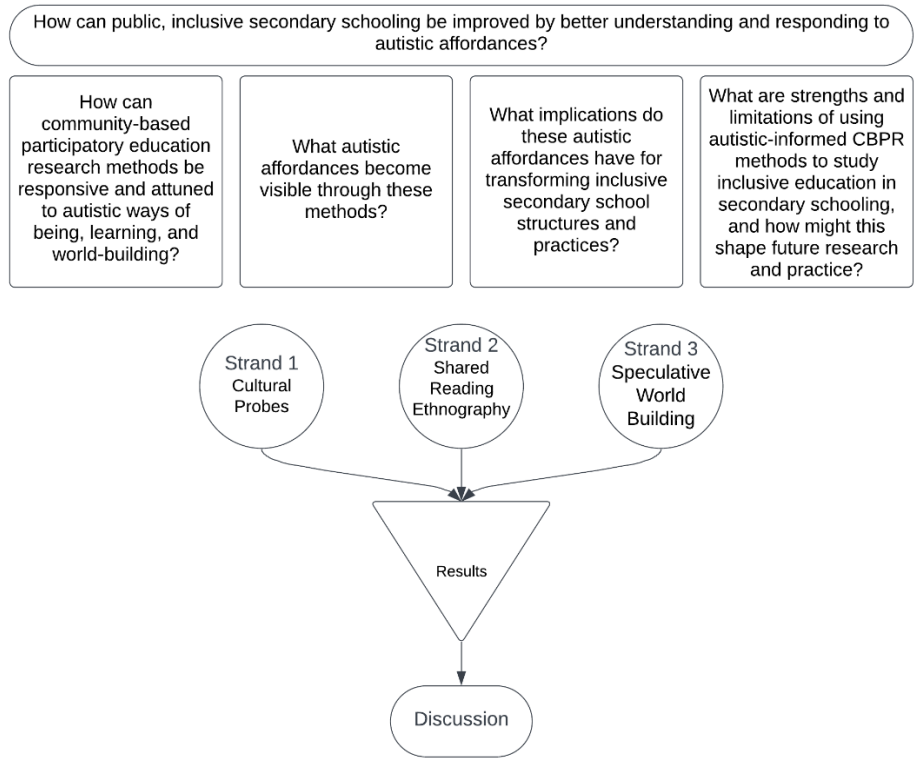


Figure 5.1

The timeline for the activities is as show in table 1. The specific dates for each shared reading meeting are in table 2.

Table 1:

Timeline for activities

Activity	Start Date	End Date
Recruitment	1 October 2022	30 November 2022
Cultural Probes	1 December 2022	15 May 2023
Shared Reading	See below (all dates in 2023)	
World Building	4 July 2023	23 February 2024

Table 2:

Dates for shared reading meetings

Participant	Pages 1-45	46-100	101-149	150-199	200-253	254-311
Evan	22 Jan	5 Feb	20 Feb	5 Feb	19 Feb	2 Apr
Jason	6 Jan	27 Jan	10 Feb	24 Feb	24 Mar	7 Apr

Karen	9 Dec	23 Dec	3 Feb	17 Feb	16 Mar	31 Mar
Gill	3 Feb	11 Feb	17 Feb	24 Feb	5 Feb	19 Mar

Participants

I recruited four autistic adults for this doctoral research project: a 20-year-old non-speaking Indigenous male, a 20-year-old white female, a 29-year-old white male, and a 28-year-old white female. Following ethics approval, I contacted the Student Accessibility Services (or equivalent) at all 23 universities in Ontario asking that the recruitment flyer be passed on to any autistic students they served. One university replied that they could only do so if the research was approved by their own ethics review board, one replied that they did not have diagnosis information on individuals and could not share it with autistic students, and one did as requested. The other 20 universities did not respond. As a result, three of the four participants are from that one university. The fourth was recruited by word of mouth through a contact I made when I presented at the Canadian Autism Leadership Summit. See table 3.

Table 3

Participants

Name	Age	Gender	Pronouns	Age of Diagnosis	Race	Nonspeaking
Evan	29	Male	He/him	First year of university	White	No
Gill	28	Female	She/they	21	White	No
Jason	20	Male	He/him		Indigenous	Yes
Karen	20	Female	She/her, they/them	8 or 9	White	No

By working with autistic people and accessing their ubiquitous expertise (Collins, 2014) I hope to learn from each of them their stories of success in educational environments that were not designed for their bodyminds. These sophisticated lay scientists (Dokumaci, 2018) had

created the necessary affordances to succeed in the education system in a typical way (graduation, attending postsecondary education) despite being non-typical. The collection of affordances they had created to do this, what Dokumaci (2023) called *disability repertoires* (p. 236), can be shared and used to build community. Their hope, and mine, is that through their participation in this research other autistic students' lives can be improved. Karen, in her initial email agreeing to participate, signed off with "Thank you again for the opportunity" despite being the one asked to give her time. Jason's initial email stated that he is "interested in this opportunity since I have struggled in the mainstream school system in the past!!" Both referred to participating in the study as an opportunity. Likewise, Jason said he "would love to participate in [the] study" and Gill signed off with "I'm looking forward to this study!"

The participants' enthusiasm for the study is the consequence of autism research historically being directed by non-autistic researchers. The most well-known autism researcher on Earth is probably Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen. Knighted by Queen Elizibeth II in 2021 for his service to people with autism, he is responsible for most of the well-known theories about autistic people, such as the mindblindness theory of autism (Baron-Cohen, 1997), the empathizing-systemizing theory (Baron-Cohen, 2008), the extreme male brain theory of autism (Greenberg et al., 2018), and the autism-spectrum quotient test of autistic traits (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001). Despite his fame, autistic researchers argue that not one of his theories is correct, all are harmful, his methodologies are suspect, and his latest project, Spectrum 10K, an attempt to harvest autistic peoples' DNA, is morally offensive with eugenic potential. Multiple researchers have pushed back on the mindblindness theory of autism (e.g., Gernsbacher & Yergeau, 2019), the empathizing-systemizing theory (e.g., Melnick, 2011), the extreme male brain theory of autism (e.g., Rippon, 2019), and the autism-spectrum quotient test of autistic traits (e.g.,

McGrath, 2019). Resistance to the Spectrum 10K project by autistics was so strong that the project was canceled (Gray-Hammond, 2025). The power of the autistic community coming together to resist a large research project headed by the most famous autism researcher, and winning, shows the power of autistic people united, and the importance of appropriate research methods in autistic research. While the Spectrum 10K team claimed the intent of their work was not to identify genetic causes of autism, autistic investigators obtained the original, unredacted grant application which, as reported by Deaf journalist and reporter Liam O'Dell, stated

> "We will investigate the biological correlates of autism: which tissues, gene-sets, cell types, and developmental periods are enriched for common genetic risk for autism. We will further investigate heritability across subtypes, sex-specific effects, and effects of social and non-social domains of autism" … in direct contrast with the summary of the study listed on Spectrum 10K's official website, where it's said the project "aims to investigate genetic and environmental factors that contribute to the wellbeing of autistic individuals and their families". (O'Dell, 2022).

This research project seeks to avoid these errors by being led by an autistic person and working with a limited version of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR). While I have created the structure of the project (the research question, the three strands and their methods) I leave the overall direction of the project to the participants. While allowing the participants to make the decisions on everything from the research question to the methods would be more in keeping with CBPR ideologies, the structure of a PhD program does not allow for that level of participant involvement. Ivankova & Wingo (2018) argue that those employing CBPR should "Involve stakeholders as coresearchers with the development of the study's aims and research questions" (p. 993) but this cannot be done in a structure where the aims and

questions must be defended before participants are recruited. Likewise, while the participants did not have a say in the choice of methods,

> The literature on participatory research has always been vague on the question of methods. This is so because for participatory research, the most important factors are the origins of the issues, the roles that those concerned with the issue play in the process, the emersion of the process in the context of the moment, the potential for mobilizing and collective learning, the links to action, the understanding of how power relationships work and the potential for communications with other experiencing similar discrimination, oppression or violence. In addition participatory research is based on the epistemological assumption that knowledge is constructed socially and therefore that research approaches which allow for social, group or collective analysis of life experiences of power and knowledge are most appropriate. (Hall, 1992, p. 20)

Authorship credit is also denied to the participants because of the IRB's requirements for participant confidentiality. Sarna-Wojcicki et al. (2017) argue that "coauthorship can be an important component of epistemic justice in participatory research" (p. 713) but it is not possible in this project.

Despite the restrictions above, the worldbuilding portion of the project allows for near-complete freedom for the participants, while the cultural probes are structured such that the participants can interact with the materials at their own pace and in their own order. In the following three chapters I explain the rational behind, the theory supporting, and the results of each method in sequence.

Speculative Research using Speculative Fiction

Tuttle (2005) reminds us that the political structures that shape our world do not magically appear fully formed, nor are they infinitely enduring. They are the result of one event leading to the next, and that "some connections are more logical and likely than others." (p. 39). Speculative methods of research using science fiction allow for investigations of these connections by making the world strange. Suvin (1979) uses the term 'cognitive estrangement' to describe "the way science fiction estranges or distances readers from their knowledge and assumptions about what constitutes reality in order to move them to question those very assumptions" (Schalk, 2018, p. 114). Schalk (2018) uses the term 'defamiliarization' "to refer to the way speculative fiction texts make the familiar social concepts of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality unfamiliar in order to encourage readers to question the meanings and boundaries of these categories." (p. 114). Slater (2024) argues that the critical function of cognitive estrangement is to make clear that reality is a social construction, that history is mutable, and to provide the opportunity to imagine alternative futures.

Speculative fiction allows for addressing issues of race even without the presence of racialized humans by mapping racial identities on aliens and other non-realist beings (Schalk, 2020). Likewise, through speculative fiction's focus on "changing bodyminds, technology (medical and otherwise), and new species is very much about the concepts of disability and ability." (Schalk, 2020, p. 23). Schalk (2020) uses the feminist disability studies term 'bodymind' to refer "to the inextricability of mind and body which seeks to emphasize how processes within and outside of our being impact one another in a myriad of unpredictable ways that cannot be cleanly divided from one another." (p. 22). In later writings, Shalk (2018) describes disability in black women's speculative fiction as 'complex embodiment' that requires acknowledgment of

the “positive, negative, and ambivalent aspects of disability (physically, mentally, and socially) as well as the relationship between all three.” (p. 24). Disability representation in science fiction can take multiples forms. The disabilities can be real disabilities projected on future peoples, or fictional ones created by the authors for a specific purpose while the disabled characters can either be real or imaginary beings. Schalk (2018) describes the use of defamiliarized realist disabilities (disabilities that exist in the real present) being applied to “the nonrealist bodyminds of demons, werewolves, and half-mortals” (p. 118) to “make these realist disabilities less clearly knowable or predictable than expected” (p. 119). This encourages readers to think about disability from the character’s perspective, not from their preconceptions of disability. Likewise, the use of nonrealist disabilities mean the reader has no preconceptions and must rely on the text (Schalk, 2018). Both approaches challenge “readers’ assumptions about the meanings, manifestations, and effects of a particular disability on physical, mental, social, and environmental levels alike, forcing readers to reconsider what they know or think they know about what it means to be disabled.” (Schalk, 2018, p. 119). Slater (2024) argues that because much of what is familiar is the product of reification and pacification through normalization, this defamiliarization of oppression develops “critical consciousness and the capacity for historicized thought” (p. 71). The ability for speculative fiction to provide unlimited possibilities to resist normalization “have important liberatory potential for marginalized people.” (Schalk, 2020).

Slater (2024) describes ‘sociological imagination’ as the ability to connect one’s personal experiences with the “socio-historical forces that produce them” (p. xi). Koro et al. (2024) claims that the ‘social imagination’ provides the ability “to envision what should be and might be” while it is the ‘radical imagination’ that provides the “capacity to think critically, reflectively, and in innovative ways about social worlds.” (p. 677). Koro et al. (2024) examines how speculative

approaches (to research, philosophy, and scenario building) can inform qualitative inquiry. They suggest a 'prefigurative methodology' that borrows from a desired future can enable scholarship that approaches the future as a place of possibilities and a "space for radical transformation." (p. 677). They argue that this is not invention from nowhere because it begins with "a point of departure that enables a coherent and rigorous speculative process of thought." (p. 679). In science fiction this departure is called the novum, the element of the story that differs from reality and creates the cognitive estrangement that distances readers from the familiar (Slater, 2024). Koro et al. (2024) claim that methodologies must build not just on possibilities, but also on the impossible and the speculative, as such scholarship can "move social sciences toward imaginative futures, futures which move beyond individual subject's histories and presence while being shaped by the subject's past." (p. 688). They argue that this will allow for the disruption of institutionally static and conventional ideas of the future and the imagining of "different, more equitable and responsible educational future subjects." (p. 688).

Disability Studies as Method

Minch (2016) points out that there exists deficit focused research on disability that would not be considered to belong to the field of disability studies, while research done by disabled scholars and activists that might not be seen as critical disability studies by disability scholars. They suggest a new approach to disability studies where the focus is on mode of analysis instead of objects of study. This reconfiguring, they argue, makes clear that research on disability is not automatically disability studies, and research that does not look directly at disability can still be disability studies. Minch (2016) describes this "methodology of disability studies" as a means of focusing on social norms that make particular attributes become impairments and how stigma is attached to specific attributes in particular populations. This methodology is intentional, Minch

argues, and works "with the goal of producing knowledge in support of justice for people with stigmatized bodies and minds." (p. 3). Minch (2017) uses Schalk's "distinction between (dis)ability ('a system of social norms which categorizes, ranks, and values bodyminds') and disability ('a historically and culturally variable category within this larger system')" (p. 1) as an important way to study "power, privilege, and oppression of bodily and mental norms which is not dependent upon the presence of disabled people, yet is informed by social perspectives, practices, and concerns about disability." (Schalk, 2017, p. 3). This approach also allows for disability to include any non-normative existence, regardless of current definitions (Schalk, 2017).

Schalk (2020) points out that black speculative fiction, especially the genre known as Afrofuturism, is known for imaging ways the distribution of medical technologies and advancements will favour wealthy white populations over others. Thus, scholars of disability and race must identify how ableism, racism, sexism, and classism shape (dis)ability. It is because of these kinds of connections between disability and fiction that Schalk (2017, 2020) suggests that disability studies can be understood as a method for analyzing (dis)ability in speculative fiction, a method that can examine "how disability is defined and redefined in non-realist worlds where the expectations, possibilities, and limits of bodyminds are different" (2020, p. 24). Schalk (2017) follows Minch in understanding critical disability studies can be "a method, an approach, a theoretical framework and perspective—not (exclusively) a study of disabled people." (p. 2). Schalk (2020) also argues that scholars using disability studies as method to analyze speculative fiction must be able to demonstrate that a character is or is not disabled in the context of the text. This use of disability studies as method must also consider how technology, especially technology that interacts with disability is presented, because "technology is neither benign nor

objective, but rather is created and used within particular social and historical contexts of privilege and oppression." (Schalk, 2018, p. 104). Schalk (2018) argues that a future without disability thanks to technology may sound positive, but questions must be asked: Who benefits from, or has access to, this technology? Whose bodyminds will the technology be tested on? Whose labour will provide the materials for this technology? Schalk (2018) reminds us that historically "people of color, women, working-class people, and people in poverty will benefit the least from technological advances and will be most at risk for harm in the development, production, and consumption of new technologies." (p. 106).

Community Based Participatory Research

A significant amount of the research on autism is done by non-autistic researchers using parent or teacher reporting rather than talking to autistic people. One example of this is Achmadi et al. (2015), who studied the use of alternative communication devices by having non-disabled undergraduate students watch a 90-second video clip of a non-disabled PhD student demonstrate the devices. Rosenzweig et al. (2024) noted that the repetitive motions associated with autism "do not put the individual or others at risk" then proceeded to do an entire study to stop those behaviours because they might "impede social interactions with peers" (p. 2). They admit in their limitations section that they had not included fading out the intervention nor considered how it could be used in a home or classroom setting, and there were no peers present during the research, noting ""For all participants' sessions, only the participant and therapist were present." (p. 5).

Milton and Green (2024) note that a lot of research on autism is ethically dubious, with concerns around informed consent and alignment with community priorities. The counters to

these concerns include methodologies that use community based participatory research (CBRP) or related approaches. CBPR involves (or seeks or aspires to) working with participants as partners, and improves the quality of the research, advances social justice, treats the lived experience of members of the community as expertise, makes research results more accessible to the community, and avoids unwanted stereotypes and interventions (Dettmering & Hodzic, 2024). While teachers and caregivers undoubtedly have insight into their interactions with autistic students, it is the students who are the experts on what it means to be an autistic student (Callon, 1986; Collins & Evans, 2002).

Community based participatory research (CBPR) is a way of studying a community in harmony with the members of that community and inline with their needs and wants, because they are given the power to direct the research. It is a social action process biased in favour of those who are dominated, exploited, poor, or excluded (Hall, 1992) drawing on the activist participatory research of the Global South of the 1970s, and Paulo Freire's praxis-based framework (Wallerstein et al., 2020). While research designed and led by academics serves to advance their agendas, participatory research is fundamentally about giving the community under study the right to speak, analyze, and act on issues that affect them (Hall, 1992). For example, Bidwell (2009) notes that when health researches do a risk assessment of a community they do not consider things that community members would include, such as the availability of health care or socio-economic factors. This exposes a flaw in the "positivist trope of feigned neutrality and objectivity" – that by making existing systems of power and privilege invisible, "most conventional educational research supports status quo political and economic agendas that benefit the powerful" (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009, p. 85). In contrast, participatory research is a "liberatory tradition" explicitly engaging questions of power and access to create radical

social change, enable oppressed groups to gain leverage to force action, and give marginalized people the power to answer questions of daily struggle and survival. (Hall, 1992, p. 17). Hall (1992), following Vio Grossi (1981), notes that participatory research initiates a process of "disindoctrination that allows people to detach themselves from the myths imposed on them by the power structure and that have prevented them from seeing their own oppression or from seeing possibilities for breaking free." (p. 23). Research using CBPR "offers the possibility for creating more equitable educational policies and more empowering and inclusive practices for educational reform from the bottom up." (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009, p. 85) Bidwell (2009) describes a continuum of CBPR, labeling the opposing poles "pragmatic and emancipatory" (p. 750). Pragmatic projects are focused on problem solving and overcoming obstacles, include "advisory boards and other consultative mechanisms" to ensure the research is ethical and culturally appropriate, and typically benefits the sponsor/funder by gaining access to "difficult-to-study communities" (Bidwell, 2009, p. 750). The opposite pole is an emancipatory approach that seeks to benefit disenfranchised communities by redistributing power and transforming social structures (Bidwell, 2009, p. 750).

Data Analysis

The data collected during each of the three phases of research will be analysed using thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Using Nowell et al. (2017)'s method each set of data is examined in detail multiple times for the researcher to become familiar with it. The research then begins to generate initial codes for the data which are refined as themes or patterns become visible. Themes and subthemes are defined and refined until no further condensation is possible.

Chapter 6 Cultural Probes

The first method I used was cultural probes. In the literature cultural probes are a way to gain a better insight into the "actual" needs of the research participants, allowing the investigator to lead a discussion without dominating it (Gaver et al., 1999). The needs of an individual or group can often be difficult to identify as biases by the researchers can lead to solutions inline with their work (every problem looks like a nail if all you have is a hammer), and when asked what they need, the participants may confuse needs and wants. While cultural probes have been used in design research for decades, they have not been widely used in education or disability research.

Cultural probes, as a means to better understand research participants, have been used in design since Gaver et al.'s Presence Project (1999). Wallace et al. (2013) provide a framework for designing and using probes, as well as an exploration of how different probes work. In using their framework, I hope to obliquely approach questions about the educational experiences of the participants in ways that have not previously been attempted. Thus, I used this framework in a new context: learning from my participants how they felt about the public education system and how they might want to see it changed. As the number of autistic students in mainstream classes increases, teachers will need better tools to support their learning. I hope that cultural probes are one way to better understand those needs and learn directly from autistic people, instead of through those adjacent to them (Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Pellicano et al., 2019). Writing on the value of this technique to participatory research, Maaß & Buchmüller (2018) note:

> The cultural probes technique played an important role in this participatory process. As artefacts the cultural probes provided a simple and at the same time extremely rich

> common language for cooperation in the project. The questions and documentation tasks in the probes demonstrated the researchers' genuine interest in everyday life practices of the participants and helped in combination with the interviews to develop a deep common understanding of retirement as a phase of life. The appealing design of the material conveyed our respect and appreciation to the participants. Cultural probes also helped to establish a relationship of mutual trust in the initial phase of the project which was extremely important for the success of the entire participatory process. (p. 133)

Cultural probes have been used in design research for decades and were conceived as a way for researchers to engage with their participants and have them "look beyond relatively well understood needs, into the fuzzier realm of their beliefs, desires and cultural preferences" (Burrows et al., 2015, p. 920). In this research it would have been insufficient to ask the participants what they liked about high school. Phrasing the question that way sets up preconditions that will lead to inauthentic answers where the participant might respond in way they believe is correct, rather than accurate to their experiences. My identification as a fellow autistic, and my desire to improve the lives of autistic students, grants some goodwill with my participants, but I am asking them to share insights into what might have been some of the most difficult years of their life. Instead of asking direct questions, the use of cultural probes allows the participants to share what they are comfortable with in a way that may provide deeper insights into their memories of high school than asking for a recollection of "the best teacher" or "the best class" would. I recognise that not all the material returned by the probes will be helpful – there is no guarantee that the dreams they share on their pillows will be related to education – but that does not mean that these will not provide insight into ways to improve existing educational systems.

The probes that I predicted would prove to be the easiest to interpret to gain insight into the way the participants were shaped by the education system are the postcards and the school map. The former reveal what they would want their high school aged self or a current high school student to know, while the latter reflects the parts of the school they found most welcoming or safe. However, each probe is open-ended in its engagement and thus its generative potential; much of what makes cultural probes dynamic as methodological tools is the co-constructed nature of meaning as participants use them to catalyze new insights and represent experience in ways unique to each persons' life story. The co-creation occurs when probe designs I have selected are sent into the world and acted on by the participants. While they are given instructions on how I intended them to work with the probes, they are also told they can use, modify, or ignore those instructions at will. Thus, the exact nature of their interaction with the probe is unknown until they submit their completed task.

Context

Cultural probes are a collection of objects that serve as a common language for both researchers and participants, expressing the research focus and providing a simple and interesting means of expression for the participants, while offering "a basis for joint learning, for negotiating interpretations, discussing perspectives and identifying problems" (Maaß & Buchmüller, 2018, p. 125). They include physical objects positioned for the participants to interact with, and through those interactions the researcher gains a ethnographic view of the participant's life.

Celikoglu et al. (2017) argues that ethnographies are useful because they provide contextual information on how people live while surveys – their epistemological opposite – "elicit answers to questions posed from the perspectives of producers or designers, leaving respondents no space to respond on their own terms" (p. 85). They found cultural probes struck a

balance between “the impositions of structured surveys and the broader outcomes of ethnographies, eliciting design-relevant information while preserving the conceptions of users” (p. 85) because of their subjectivity, openness, and ability to provoke discussion. The probes and individual follow-up interviews offer a ‘Third Space’ for successful cooperation (Maaß & Buchmüller, 2018), and the method is sufficiently flexible to work in a wide range of research situations. For example, Paay (2009) notes that by 2009 this method had been successfully used to study care facilities for elderly people, design for a sensitive health care setting, study intimacy in couples, and for data collection for a domestic design process. In these studies,

The term cultural probe covers a variety of objects and tasks that Thoring et al. (2013) fit into ten categories: wrapping, diary, maps, framework, photo/video documentation, 3D tools, random probes, surveys, gifts, and supporting materials (pp. 6-7). The wrapping is the packaging or container in which the probes are housed; diaries are used to collect participants’ structured or unstructured thoughts and writing; maps record participants’ observations, memories, or visions of spaces in real or imagined worlds; frameworks are a catch-all for data collection in the form of time-related, value-orientated, or abstract mappings; documentation usually takes the form of photos or videos recorded by the participants in response to prompts or questions by the researcher; 3D tools are physical objects the participants interact or build with; random probes are unstructured activities mostly left to the participants’ own devices; surveys provide the researcher with qualitive data, gifts are a method of thanking and motivating the participants; and supporting materials are the tools, prompts, and instructions the participants will need to work with the probes (pp. 6-7).

Thoring et al. (2013) also identified six functions that the probes serve: documentary, visionary, inspirational, motivational, practical, and instructive (p. 7). Documentary probes are

used to capture participants' observations and activities; visionary probes are similar but capture emotions and wishes; inspirational probes are, as the name suggests, to inspire the participants in a non-physical way while motivational prompts help to keep participants engaged through a physical reward; practical prompts are included for practical purposes; and instructive prompts direct the participants in their use of the prompt package. Some probes might have multiple categories and/or functions, such as the fidget diaries (see figure 2) I sent to my participants; they fit into both the diary and gift categories and were both documentary and practical.

Figure 2

Fidget diary

The variety of items other researchers have used as cultural probes is varied. There are records of the use of maps, cameras, photo albums, and media diaries (Gaver et al., 1999); diaries, task books, and projective tools (pens, stickers, markers, etc.) (Celikoglu et al., 2017); and diaries, pairs of linen bags (one each marked with a smiley or sad face), cameras, and postcards (Maaß & Buchmüller, 2018). Cultural probe packages usually also include a list of tasks for the participant to do and the equipment necessary for them to carry out the tasks, such as documenting experiences using a camera, art supplies, or stickers. These packages need to

encourage the participants to do the requested tasks while also making them feel that they are being treated as experts (what Collins (2014) calls experience-based experts).

Cultural probes do not give an objective view of the participants' needs, but rather generate an impressionistic account of their beliefs, desires, references, and cultural concerns (Gaver et al., 1999). This data provides a rich and detailed look into the participants past and present, as well as inspiring future designs (Paay et al., 2009). While explicit lines of questioning regarding post-secondary students' impressions of public education based on their experiences will feature in this research, cultural probes will allow for deeper engagement beyond surface-level inquiry.

Data Collection

To establish my protocol, I used Thoring et al.'s (2013) explanation of the different categories and functions of probes and created a 10x6 matrix, with the intention of having at least one entry in each of the 10 categories and two in each of the six functions. Some of my selections include Wallace et al.'s (2022) pillow probe, and Burrows et al.'s (2015) camera prompts and 'Remember When' prompts. Leeds-Hurwitz (2015) describes a 'thick description' as one "sufficient to permit the reader to see below surface appearances by offering an understanding of underlying patterns and context". I hoped that by drawing on a variety of cultural probe categories and functions I would gain such insights into the lived experiences of my autistic participants.

In my research design I did not have probes for all categories or functions. The probe packages contained 12 probes (see table 4).

Table 4

Probe Matrix

	Wrapping	Diary	Maps	Frameworks	Photo/Video Documentation	3d Tools and Materials	Random Probes	Surveys or Questionnaires	Gifts	Supporting Material
Documentary		Diary	High school map		Camera prompts		Short bio		Diary	
Visionary		Pillow		Postcard to younger self		Room planning kit				
Inspirational				Remember When sheets Postcards to a current student						
Motivational										
Practical	Reusable bag								Pen, bag	
Instructive										Pen, marker Instructions

The “Ew, people” bag served as the wrapping for my probes, though in practice the entire package was sent to participants in a Canada Post pre-paid shipping box. This bag and the fidget pen were both practical and gifts to the participants, with the pen also being supporting material, as was the marker to write on the pillow. The list of items included is shown in figure 3. The novel is part of the ethnographically inspired shared reading component of my research and not one of my probes.

Figure 3

Probe package contents

Figure 6.1: Probe package contents

“Ew, People” Bag	
Instruction sheet	

Remember when sheets (3)	
Camera prompt sheet	
Failure to Communicate by Kaia Sønderby* *Only if you requested a paperback copy, otherwise a digital copy will be emailed	
Diary	
Fidget pen A gift for you. Caution: contains small magnets; keep away from children	
Pillow	
High school map	
Night sky post cards	

Inspiration post cards	
Room planning kit	

The instruction for the probe package gave the participants the freedom to decide on their own order and timeline for completing the probes. I provided a suggested schedule that would take a few minutes a week for four weeks, but they were free to decide what would work best for their schedule.

The fidget notebook was to be used as a diary (under the diary category) and as a gift (since the research activities would only use a few pages). Its documentary function was explained in the instructions sent as part of the probe package:

Please keep a diary/log/written record as you do the rest of the tasks. You can write as much or as little as you like, and as often as you want. At a minimum I ask that you make an entry after you do each of the other tasks, giving your thoughts on doing them, but it is entirely up to you. Take pictures of each entry as you go and email them to me.

The participants were also asked to write a short biography, either in the notebook or digitally.

Postcards, under the frameworks category, were used for two functions: inspiration and visionary. Inspiration post cards, taken from a book of postcards titled "It's Gonna Be OK-ish"[2] are a sarcastic take on motivational posters, a type of humour popular with autistics (Samson et al., 2013). The instructions for these postcards asked the participants to write "to a current autistic high school student who is struggling." They could base this fictitious student on themselves or invent them, and they were to pick one of the three cards they had randomly been sent (with the remaining two to keep as gifts). The other postcards, from a set called "The Night Sky"[3], were to be addressed to the participants' younger self. They were asked to consider: "What would you say to your high school aged self? What knowledge would you want to have known when you were in high school?" and pick one of the randomly selected postcards to use. Again, the extras were to be kept as gifts.

The pillow prompt was adapted from Wallace et al. (2013), and used a small pillow that had a hidden fold-out flap of fabric. This is a diary-visionary probe that asked the user to carry the pillow with them for a few days to provide a physical reminder of their dreams, after which they were to use the included permanent marker to write their dream on the hidden flap. Wallace et al. (2013) explained this format, similar to lying one's head on a pillow, fosters engagement at a more intimate level than just writing on paper. That the user must make a permanent mark on the object and that they can hide their response away makes their response both a commitment and a secret. This was the most popular of the activities and was the first activity that every participant completed.

[2] https://www.amazon.ca/dp/B0B33N22C8/
[3] https://www.amazon.ca/gp/product/1616897341/

To learn more about the participants' experience of the physical space of a school I sent each a colour printed map of a school building in Langdon, Alberta[4]. This school map was chosen because it was colour coded based on the different departments or uses of the rooms and served as a generic 'any school.' The participants were asked to use it, or a map of the real high school they attended, to show places in the school where they would spend their free time, and optionally list what they liked to do in those spaces.

The room planning activity involved providing the participants with a packaged room design kit[5] that contained graph paper and repositionable scale model stickers of furniture. The participants were asked to create their perfect workspace using the stickers, and optionally sketching anything beyond what the stickers provided.

The final two probes asked the participants to tell a series of stories. The "remember when" sheets and the camera prompts were probe designs by Burrows et al. (2015). The "remember when" sheets asked the participants to tell, in any format they chose, three stories: a time when they asked for help even though they didn't need it; a time when they needed help but didn't ask for it; and a time they helped others. The camera probe consisted of 10 prompts for the participants to photograph: something they like doing with other people; something they like doing alone; something they need help doing; something they do with someone else even though they don't need to; something they like to help other people do; something they do the same way today as when they were younger; something they do differently now from when they were younger; something they used to do but do not anymore; something that makes them feel independent; and something that makes them feel dependent (Burrows et al., 2015).

[4] http://www.goodlucktown.ca/future-projects.html
[5] https://shop.canvascorpbrands.com/products/room-spacing-kit-office-studio

Results

Biography

Each participant was asked to provide a short description of themselves. One participant, Karen, did not submit a biography despite repeated requests.

Evan, the oldest and most (formally) educated of the participants, is a master's student who lives with his dog and fiancé. He describes himself as "an elite level in three sports (hockey, Muay Thai, and cross country)" who uses sports as a vehicle to control his autism related issues. Much of his biography describes how he wants to devote his life to making the world better (and better for autistic people). His career goals are to "become a professor and help shape the future generation", to start his "own business aimed at helping autistic people develop their self-regulatory skills and unlock their full potential so they can have a better quality of life." He was moved to participate in this project because he felt rejected by the world growing up and "[t]he idea of contributing to research that can help build a better future for individuals with ASD make [him] really excited as my life goal is to improve conditions for people like [him]!"

Gill is the second oldest of the four participants. She describes herself as being "Autistic with anxiety, depression and very recently diagnosed ADHD" that she is working on. She was diagnosed with a "non-verbal learning disability" around the age of 10, which was diagnosed as autism at 21. She is on disability benefits because her sensory issues and anxiety make finding accessible entry level retail work difficult. She describes herself as a creative storyteller who is obsessed with cartoons and videogames, especially Pokémon. She has participated in online collaborative story telling before, which will be helpful in the third phase of this project. Her writing is excellent, flowing and detailed, and much more extensive than the others'. Before grade 5 she reports that while she was an introvert and preferred to play alone at home, she was

still social at school. At this point she was suddenly unable to connect with people as well as she had in the past, appearing as the "immature or weird one in a group" and becoming the target of bullies. The worst of the bullying was her first two years of high school before she moved "just to get away from it" and got a fresh start. She noted that she did have friends, other autistics, because they were better able to understand each other, but this may have exacerbated the problem because she had no incentive to "compromise on behaviour so other people could understand" her. She describes how her sense of morality and justice was shaped by "superhero stories" and how she relied on her knowledge of characters and story tropes to guide her behaviours with other people.

In describing her academic skills, she reports she was "one of those 'gifted kids' right through until the end of grade school" so she never was forced to learn how to learn. When she was unable to get into an animation college program from high school she said, "the rejection hurt a lot since I put so much of my self worth into that "everything comes easy to me" gifted kid persona I had built up. I never really learned how to fail and get back up."

Like Evan, Gill also worries about the way other autistics feel. She finds the knowledge that there are other people like her "bittersweet", "there's solidarity in that there are other people I can talk to about these experiences, but also despair at the thought of other people knowing the kind of deep sadness I've felt."

Jason is a nonspeaking, Indigenous male undergraduate student in Indigenous Studies with plans to go to law school at the University of Ottawa after graduation. He reports that his ideal job would be working as a lawyer for the federal government or an Indigenous not-for-profit organization in Ottawa. He works and volunteers with campus organizations including two equity roles: OC Cabinet Equity and Accessibility Commissioner and on the Equity, Diversity

and Inclusion Task Force of the Housing CASSC Committee, as well as helping first year students acclimate to the university. He also participates in the annual Collegiate Leadership Competition, learning "how to lead by example as a leader in our ever changing (sic) society." He notes that he thrives in a demanding environment where he is respected as a person, and his fellow student leaders (and friends) are proud of him.

Karen did not submit a biography despite multiple requests. From her introductory email I know she is a second-year undergraduate student in forensic biology who was diagnosed with "high functioning autism" at 8 or 9 years old.

A common thread in the three biographies is an acknowledgement of the harm experienced by younger autistics. Gill despairs that other people feel the sadness she has, while Evan wants to dedicate his life to improving the quality-of-life autistics experience. Jason is not as specific in this desire but does work with first year students to support their transition and is active in improving equality at his university.

Remember When

The Remember When probes (Burrows et al., 2015) are three sheets of paper with one question on each. The participants are to answer the question in any format (image, text, etc.). The questions/prompts are:

1) Tell me a story of a time you provided help to others
2) Tell me a story of a time when you asked for help even though you didn't need it
3) Tell me a story of a time when you needed help but didn't ask for it

Evan responded to prompt 1 with the volunteer work he does as the head of his university's varsity cross country program. His response to prompt 2 reveals that as a child he was criticized and judged for the way he "chose (sic) to complete tasks" and so he grew up without confidence

in his ability to take actions without first confirming with an adult. This is referenced in his answer to prompt 3, that because of the judgment when he was younger, he now enjoys the challenge of independently taking on tasks. His second point, that he does not wish to be a burden to others by asking for or needing help, might also be a result of this.

Gill included her response in an email and not on the sheets. She also did not respond to the prompts but instead took the activity name literally and provided three memories. The first vignette is the story of her first day at her new school and tells of her arriving to school early, nerding out over another student's comic book print satchel, and that student brining her into their friend group. The second is of her friends dragging her to a Canada Day celebration, and how at the end of the day they recognized she was near sensory overload and made a human wall around her on the bus. The third story is of the validation she felt when her father apologised for failing her as a child and validating the hurt and fear she had felt. She notes that her mother "still struggles to admit when she's wrong" but that she often does not have the confidence to call her mother out and speak her mind.

Jason responded to two of the prompts by discussing his student leadership roles. He provided help to others by helping first year students with the transition to university, and he asked for help he did not need when running events like homecoming and the grade 8 and grade 9 days at his high school. He need help, but did not receive it, in grade 11 and 12 in his History and English classes with editing but now receives that aid through the university academic skills office and his father.

Karen was the only participant to include drawings in her responses, but she wrote significantly less text. She has helped others with the transport, building, and takedown of the set piece for musicals she has been involved with. She has asked for help from others to complete all

achievements in a videogame, though it is not clear why she asked if she did not need the help. The time she needed help but did not ask involved transporting items to sell from her dorm room to a market at the beginning of winter.

With three different prompts and four participants I was hoping to see patterns of behaviour in how they answered the questions. Evan and Jason both responded to the question on helping others with examples of volunteering at their university, and Karen's response of assisting the theater group with their set up and break down is of a similar bent. When asked how they help others all three thought of providing service to a larger community rather than assisting one or more people with personal needs.

Night Sky Postcards

Evan's postcard to his younger self focuses on getting over some disappointment related to no longer playing hockey, being different, having an explosive temper, and eventually having "the best dog and family". The reference to Cyclops and goggles refers to the Marvel Comics character: mutant Scott Summers fires explosive blasts from his eyes, which he cannot control except by wearing special rose quartz goggles or glasses.

Gill and Jason used all three postcards (the intent was for the participants to keep two for themselves). While Jason's message was positive thoughts for his younger self, Gill's message was more around reassuring herself that what she was feeling was normal. The areas she wrote about were her sexuality (aromantic and asexual), her parents not getting her help or her not trusting the help, and her autism and ADHD.

Karen encouraged her past self by describing her recent success: having a long-term boyfriend, making Dean's List, and selling her art. She directly references the hell of high

school, something Gill alluded to with her comment that “everyone is dumb in high school, including you”.

Room Planning Kit

Evan and Gill both designed very similar work areas. Both used the same wraparound desk and chair, though Evan has plants on his desk while Gill has the plants further away from the work area to leave space for a second computer monitor and a lamp. Gill included a bed for her cat and Evan one for his dog. Both rooms included a couch, but Gill’s couch is a two-seater, where Evan has a three-seater and a table with four chairs. Both included the largest bookshelves in the kit, though Evan has two, side by side, and Gill only has one, but there are books on a table near the sofa as well as a floor lamp. Evan has a fireplace (plus wood and tools) in his workspace. Karen’s workplace is a much larger area divided into four roughly equal parts. Starting from the top right is a workspace with a L-shaped desk and chair, an additional desk and chair, filing cabinets and a table, and a TV or computer screen on the wall. This is the only desk without a monitor, so it is possible she will use a laptop as her working computer. Moving clockwise is a conference area with a meeting table and armoire. Next is a room with a sofa-bed, two tables, a chair, a cat bed and a TV on the wall. The final room might be for her to do her creative work – a “creative island” that she drew in lighting for and in arm’s reach of a desk or table, perhaps holding her tools (the text is illegible in her photo). The rear of the room is separated by a divider and holds three large “metal storage racks”, perhaps to hold her completed work.

Dream Pillow

The dream pillow task was the most popular one with the participants and was the first one completed by all four. Evan, a graduate student and cross-country runner, dreams of

competing in the national championships of the U-Sports league, which governs most university sports in Canada. Gill, who wrote in her biography about her love of stories and attempt to study animation, wants to make a story that will inspire others the way she was, and is, inspired by great stories. Jason wrote two points. One, about wanting to think beyond psychoanalysis, and another, about being able to enter the sky world – the realm of existence that is home to spirits of creativity. Karen's dream was the most pragmatic, that she be able to find work as a mortician or coroner after she graduates.

Inspirational Postcards

Evan wrote three postcards of one sentence each. Two of these implied the student being motivated was experiencing difficulties and needed support to know that life would be better in the future. One explicitly stated that "life gets better" and the other implied that the reader wouldn't know their own value until the future.

Gill wrote two postcards that spoke to specific concerns that her hypothetical student might have. One stated the reader had the right to experience negative emotions, that despite what their parents might think the emotions are a bid deal, and they have the right to feel how they want to feel. The other comforted the reader with the idea that there are people out there who are worth the trouble ("effort and heartache") to be close with, and that, while caution is necessary, it is possible to make meaningful friendships online.

Jason's postcard appears to be a form of blessing that the reader be supported by sky woman and mother earth. Karen's postcard image was too small to be legible and despite multiple requests to resend the image she did not provide a legible version.

High School Map

Evan's map notes two locations where he preferred to spend time, if his third option of leaving the grounds was not available. He would workout in the fitness or weight room or play games in the library. Gill and Karen had similar responses to Evan. They also indicated they were the happiest in the library and in a room dedicated to their interest – watching cartoons on a classroom projector for Gill and in the art room for Karen. Jason created his own map, rather than marking up the provided one. His "Mother Earth Alternative School" includes outdoor areas for tipi, campfires, pow-wows, and preparing Bannock. In what are presumably indoor spaces there are rooms to gather, work in groups, and mentor peers – all a reflection of Jason's belief in the importance of working and learning together. Rooms for cultural activities, such as smudging and drumming are also present. It is notable that there is no library in Jason's plan. Like with the other three participants, the important aspects of the school directly relate to the participant's interests. It is hardly unexpected that autistic students (and presumably most students) found the parts of school that resonated with them the most to be the most comfortable. The popularity of the library could be due to the presence of books, though not all participants are avid readers, or due to the lower levels of stimulation and sensory overload in the library. Compared to the few other gathering spaces in a high school, like cafeteria with its movement, sounds, and smells, the library is a much quieter place.

Camera Prompts

Something you like doing with other people

Evan's response to this prompt is a photo or a pair of boxing gloves and the video game UFC4 for the PS4 game system. Practicing his martial arts, both in person and in a video game, is how he spends time with his friends. Gill watches TV shows while in a video call with at least one friend. This helps her concentrate and provides an opportunity to "info-dump and over

analyse media". Jason wrote that he likes to learn about Indigenous culture with his parents and included a photo of a museum exhibit on Iroquoian history and culture. Karen sent a picture of her and her friends playing an escape room style board game. This is a cooperative game where the players work together to escape the room or solve a mystery rather than a game where one player tries to defeat the other players.

Something you like doing alone

Evan wrote that he likes to do statistics (learning about it and analyzing his data) alone. Gill likes to do things alone, so she won't be criticized for how she does them. She specified that this mostly applies to household chores and that she gets frustrated when her mother looks over her shoulder when she's doing these chores. She also finds it especially frustrating when her mother looks over her shoulder when she is reading/writing emails. Jason's photo is of a book by an Indigenous author on a pathway to reconciliation. Like the activity of going out with his parents to learn about Indigenous culture, he likes to read about Indigenous ways of making a better world.

Something you need help doing

Evan receives help from his fiancée to maintain his hygiene routine. He notes that she bought him a device to help with flossing his teeth, and that it through her support and encouragement he can maintain his health and hygiene. Gill writes that finding employment is a "real struggle". Despite government support for her disabilities, she is still tasked with finding places to apply and find the whole process frustrating and demotivating.

Something you do with someone else even though you don't need to

Evan, who has been running since childhood and competes in cross country running events, likes to go on walks with his fiancée and dog. Gill found this probe hard to respond to as she has trouble recognizing when she does need help. She answered the prompt by saying that

she likes to be in a video call with people when writing or drawing because “it helps satisfy my need for multiple points of focus without me getting distracted from the main task.”

Something you like to help other people do

Evan responded to this prompt with a photo of binders for the class Psych 3015, which is the course he tutors. He takes joy in helping people learn statistics, something he hated in school when he was younger. Gill enjoys helping other people play video games or providing trivia when they watch a television show. She notes that she is not a great video game player but enjoys the story and aesthetics when other people play, and so enjoys helping and experiencing it that way. Jason is heavily involved with orientation events at his university and his photo is of a group of orientation leaders. He enjoys getting people settled into the school and involved in school spirt activities.

Something you do the same way today as when you were younger

Evan’s photo of a treadmill and his one-word explanation, “running”, link his childhood interest in running with his present-day involvement in cross country running. Gill’s entry is that she still hides her vegetables in her mashed potatoes to mask the texture. She says it’s a childish habit, but necessary because of her food texture sensitivities and her family’s habit of boiling all the food to the exclusion of other ways of preparing it.

Something you do differently now from when you were younger

Evan hated math when he was younger but now loves it and feels “silly because I still can’t believe I love math so much I read about it in my free time”. He submitted a photo of a multivariate statistics textbook. Gill takes more control over the foods she eats. This started when she was living in her school dorm and was responsible for her own grocery shopping, as well as being able to be more adventurous while on her own. When she was out of her family’s house she could try new foods without worrying “about not liking it and facing judgment for wasting

food and being forced to eat it". She does not have as much freedom now that she's moved back in, but she has a better sense of what she likes now. Karen shared a picture of a tablet with drawings of characters from the show Steven Universe she made for her business. She explained that when she was younger she drew on paper and in sketchbooks, but now has switched to digital drawings.

Something you used to do but do not anymore

Evan submitted a photo of a punching bag, noting in his reflection that he felt both pride and longing when taking the image. "Pride because I am proud of what I accomplished in Muay Thai; logging because I miss fighting." Gill's response to the prompt was what she felt was the most childish – that she only in the last few years stopped eating her meals one item at a time, leaving the vegetables for last. This means that they were "cold, soggy and the worst" for her sensory issues. Her favourite meals were ones where the food was already combined because "the unifying sauce helped the flavours mellow out for me" but they were uncommon in a family that preferred "protein, potatoes, and vegetables with a glass of milk" meals. Looking back, she finds it frustrating how little variation there was in dinners, and how her sensory needs were not accounted for.

Something that makes you feel independent

Evan responded to this probe with a picture of his dog. He notes that her, and the lesson of life she taught him are the reason he is still here. Gill wrote that just doing mundane tasks when home alone makes her feel independent. She counts the two years living in her collage dorm as one of the best experiences she's had and the only time she really felt like an independent adult. She had to balance her school responsibilities with the freedom to choose what she ate and when she slept, with no authority figure looming over her. She was also free of the feeling of being judged when she did things her own way, even if it was "a little weirder than

normal when it made sense to me". She still gets this feeling when her mom is out and she is alone, able to "talk to myself or my cat, dance in the kitchen, make mistakes and nobody's around to criticize."

Something that makes you feel dependent

Evan's image for this prompt is of the bubble journal he was sent as one of the probes for this project. He explained that the shifting gradient colours of the cover represents how his mood shifts, and that it is when he experiences an emotional breakdown that he feels the most dependent on other people. Gill understandably contrasts her answer to the previous question, that when she is doing those mundane tasks and someone tells her she is doing it wrong and takes over is when she feels the least empowered. She is left "standing there off to the side like a freaking lemon" and unable to learn the 'proper' way she is expected to do the task. This forced dependence, which she attributes to being the baby of the family, is "part of the reason why I struggle with being able to fail and pick myself up again." She feels that she has been conditioned not to try if she can't be perfect, and she becomes paralyzed when she makes a mistake waiting for someone to come in and take over.

Reflective Journal Entries

The participants were asked to reflect weekly on the cultural probe tasks they performed that week. Only Evan and Gill submitted a set of reflections, though Jason commented on the critical probes and project as a whole when he received his package. He commented "Got my supplies in the mail already - it's very well organized! Yes I am so excited to have cool zoom sessions - I am so glad that Kate recommended this study to me. This research study is the best and been well designed as well too".

Evan submitted four reflections for the four weeks he engaged with the probes, with all the reflections connected to specific probes. The comments were discussed in the relevant section above. Gill reflected on the probes as well, but also on the project, the novel which she was reading at the same time, and her life in general.

In the first week she was unsure how she felt about participating in the project, but hopeful that she was contributing to something that would help other autistics. She was concerned that her responses were too negative but saw that as a paradox: only by talking about how bad things were could she try and make them better. She also felt it necessary to hold back on discussing the interactions of her depression, anxiety, autism, and ADHD for now. She also posed some questions in her reflection on the other participants in the study, who she would meet during the collaborative world building phase, wonder if she was older than them and if she would have advice that would benefit them. The idea of being a knowledgeable elder seemed to frighten her, as she notes “I don't feel that much like an adult, just a kid that seen some shit most days.”

Gill’s week two reflection starts out on a negative note, that she has been having a tough week, that she is behind in the reading for the study, and that her (ADHD) medication is not working. She was having a communication breakdown with an autistic friend and noted that it is much worse when it happens with a fellow autistic then a neurotypical. This made her feel especially alone and made giving positive advice hard.

In week three Gill shared that the probe exercises were making her “frustrated and depressed” and that she was particularly dreading the advice to her younger self task. When she says “these letters to my past self don't bring catharsis like intended” it is not clear if the intention is that of the study or her own intention. As with all of the probes there is no specific

result that is expected and so no intentionality was communicated. This could be her assumption that this task was designed to provide an emotional release, or her own hope that there was a way to, even theoretically, reduce the difficulty and pain she has experienced. Her final line, “I can wish I did or didn't do stuff in the past all I want, it doesn't change anything now” makes it clear that creating counterfactuals of her past does not bring her hope.

Week four of Gill’s reflection shares her feelings about the ending of the novel, which is notes she had figured out earlier, and is somewhere between negative and neutral. She says that “I can't really say I'm enjoying the read either but I don't hate it. It's just there” and is surprised that the conclusion is not a typical happy ending. She feels the author is “just wallowing in the struggle Xandri has and pandering for relatability.” Regarding the study, she was taking to her sister-in-law, a teacher, about her participation. The sister-in-law’s reaction was “blase”, and that due to a lack of funds for school reform, no number of studies will have any effect. The idea that nothing will come of the study is upsetting to Gill, and she hopes that “school can/will be better than what I went through as a kid”. She blames the continued misunderstanding of autism on anti-vaccination “jackasses” and Autism Speaks.

Gill’s reflection for week five was written after speaking with me, and she notes that our conversations “always manage to get so far off track so often in these calls but at least towards tangential topics.” In the Zoom call there was some discussion of how I support my own son’s autistic needs, and she comments “I'm glad he's so supportive of his son’s special interests and infodumping, but then again Ryan is on the spectrum so he just gets it.” Regarding her reading of the novel she notes the author is not subtle in her writing. She calls out the “ham fisted writing” but finds the situation relatable. The way she connected the officer in the novel calling for Xandri to keep still with “quiet hands like a fucking teacher” is not surprising, but does make it clear

who has demanded this of her before. She is also understandably upset that in the novel there are "space Nazis, Orcs and **eugenics won**" (emphasis hers).

In the final set of reflections, for week six, Gill celebrates that the tasks are finished but notes that "I think when I signed up for this I didn't think it would be as emotionally exhausting as it was. I don't know if it's just my own negativity or whatever but some of these exercises products have not great memories and the hypotheticals weren't much better." She did feel a sense of validation when I agreed that the experiences she shared were "fucked". She intends, in a way, to continue the novel study portion of the project by lending the book to friend (who is a writer) to get their (not autistic) take on it. She concluded by noting that the room design activity was fun, comparing it to the video game The Sims, and calling on the Pokémon god Arceus to witness her statement that she spends a lot of time designing room in the game.

Chapter 7 Shared Reading

My Shared Reading methodology involved each participant and myself reading a book and discussing it. The book I chose, *Failure to Communicate* (Sønderby, 2017), was chosen because it is a science fiction (SF) novel, by an autistic author, with an autistic protagonist and written in the first person.

I met with each participant individually over Zoom every other week to give sufficient time for reading 1/6th of the novel (roughly 50 pages) and making notes on what stood out and/or resonated with them. They would go through their list of aspects of the story they found interesting or relatable, and once their list was exhausted, I would cover any points on my list they we had not already discussed.

There were four advantages to using Zoom: I was not limited in physical proximity to my participants; we avoided the risks of meeting during a pandemic; I was able to record the meetings for later transcription; and it allowed the participants to be more at ease. As Savarese (2018) notes, autistics quickly become fatigued when in unfamiliar settings as they are constantly on guard, hypervigilant, anxious. By having our discussion remotely, they can take breaks or stim as needed in a familiar environment.

Context

Chapple, Davis, et al. (2021) suggested that shared reading could be a "particularly advantageous methodology for autistic people" (p. 3) as it helped participants see the world from different perspectives. Also, by using a novel as a shared artifact (Paay et al., 2009), I hoped to use the book as common ground to create a shared social setting where "discussion was not just

‘about’ but ‘around’ and ‘within’ the book.” (Chapple, Davis, et al., 2021, p. 7). I chose to use Science Fiction, specifically what Selwyn et al. (2020) called “social science fiction”: texts that tell “‘inexistent’ tales ‘that inspire the sociological imagination’” (p. 92). I also wanted to use a text by an autistic author, both to ensure proper representation, and because autistic readers are more likely than neurotypical readers to be interested in the authors’ intent and background (Chapple, Williams, et al., 2021).

As noted above, the literature indicated that a methodology based on shared reading could potentially be an effective way to avoid the binary ideologies that often impede autistic participation in research. Chapple, Davis, et al. (2021), following Longden et al. (2015), believed that discussing fiction promoted communal thinking and encouraged “explorations of individual differences” (p. 3). Longden et al. (2015), citing Dowrick et al. (2012), described shared reading as a “socially coalescing presence, allowing readers a sense of subjective and shared experience.” (p, 1). In his book, *See It Feelingly* (2018), Savarese engages in a form of shared reading with well known autistic partners. He describes this work as “intentionally, if casually, ethnographical” in that he converses with his “partners” and reports what they have to say about the novel and their experiences (p. 12). This is a newer way of engaging in ethnography, one done through a framework of dialogue that “displaced the politically charged, asymmetrical metaphor of ‘reading over the shoulders of natives’ with that of ‘reading alongside natives’” (Lassiter, 2005, p. 5).

As with any form of ethnography involving disabled participants, the goal is to make noticeable the micro-activist affordances that each participant was forced to create. These are often rendered invisible by what Dokumaci (2018) calls the “habitus of ableism.” My intention

with this method was to spark the imaginations and the memories of my participants, for them to reflect on what they read and what buried thoughts the readings might unearth. As this character creates her affordances (inspired, no doubt, by those made by her author) I wanted to learn how would my participants react – agreement, disagreement, alternative options, or just discussion of the (lack of) relatability. To do this I need to avoid using a text where the character was presented as a "super crip" (Davis et al., 2018, p. 30) who only experienced positive aspects of autism. Rather, the story had to show a realistic and balanced portrayal of being autistic to give us something to collaboratively engage with.

I chose to read fiction, instead of non-fiction, for the reasons noted above, and because "fiction encourages an overcoming of social pressures and conformity" (Chapple et al., 2022, p. 3). Further, in research autistics have shown a preference for fiction from the SF and fantasy genres (Chapple, Williams, et al., 2021). SF, as a genre, is defined by the way it holds the present up for critique by extrapolating where we as a people might end up if we continue (or do not continue) on this path. In her PhD dissertation, Brittany Tomin (2021a) argues that science fiction narratives are deeply ingrained in the social consciousness as a way to process change. For her, the future is "a site of contestation and dissensus in the spirit of radical democracy" where democratic engagement is "characterized by the ceaseless disruption of pre-existing systems, structures, and views through claims for equality" (p. 6). She views SF as "a narrative catalyst for navigating difference and change" and employs world building "as a means through which plural futures can be imagined and negotiated." (p. 18). In her work, collective world building is "conceptualized … as an opportunity to reinvigorate publicness in education through communities of contestation and disruption." (p. 18). Dokumaci's (2018) invisible normate can be more easily forced into visibility in a science fictional construction that centers the mis-fit and

makes the "normal" strange. Tomin (2021a) notes that science fiction can draw attention to the "constructed nature of reality and truth … through the range of futures" imagined in the "fictional futures, tropes, and themes … that build upon each other and inspire further science fictional, future-oriented narrative explorations" (Tomin, 2021a, p. 26). Educational researchers have shown that studying SF is a way to shine a spotlight on how things are now by imagining how they could be different, and this can engage learners by showing them "excitement of identifying and describing social forces at work in their world" (Passell, 2013, p. 61). Further, Savarese (2018) notes that autism and SF go together like "two astronaut peas in a spaceship pod" (p. 89), and so reading SF by an autistic author, about an autistic protagonist, with an autistic research partner, appeared to be an excellent way to learn about their experiences and to mobilize SF as "a subversive literature through which we can imagine *otherwise*; to build upon the past, critically interrogate the present and write in pursuit of possible futures" (Tomin, 2021b, p. 242).

Shared reading has been used in several journal articles and/or monographs to understand how autistic people view the world (Chapple, Davis, et al., 2021; Chapple et al., 2022; Savarese, 2018). Savarese (Savarese, 2018) used a mixture of genres of literature in his ethnographies of autistics, including SF. Through shared reading of a novel written by an autistic, featuring an autistic main character, and where the character's lived autistic experience is part of the plot but not the entirety of it, participants will be encouraged to envision possible futures in which educational systems are more welcoming of autistic students. The novel *Failure to Communicate* (Sønderby, 2017) focuses on one of the only neurodiverse humans remaining in the galaxy after humanity began using genetic manipulation to remove 'imperfections' in the population. The skills she developed to survive in a world (and galaxy) not made for her give her a skillset that

makes her especially good at understanding newly discovered species. Such a skillset is not farfetched, as researchers have argued that individuals who have been dehumanized need to think about the ways society is constructed and so have a deeper understanding of the social world than others (Chapple et al., 2022). The author avoids the "autism is a superpower" trope by showing both the advantages and disadvantages of her autistic mind in a stressful situation where the fate of millions (or billions) rides on her success. I intend to employ this work of fiction because Chapple et al. (2022) believes that texts that deal with adversity are more likely to have a strong emotional effect on the reader, "prompting new, more careful ways of thinking about different minds" (p. 4). They argue that this effect would be more pronounced in those who deal with adversity in their daily lives, such as autistics, who would then be "prompted to further reconstruct their views on societal construction" (p. 4). The advantage of fiction over non-fiction in this research is that fiction simulates the real social world and allows readers to "embody character perspectives and feelings to achieve felt empathy" and "encourages an overcoming of social pressures and conformity in a way that moves readers away from default or rigid ways of thinking" (p. 3). Chapple et al. (2021) argues that the social simulations of fiction inform real world understandings. They argue against the use of strictly scientific research methodologies that rely on binary, neuronormative ideologies, recommending instead that researchers employ creative and open methodologies as immersive shared experiences. They suggest that shared reading and discussion of fiction avoids multiplicitous thinking and enables exploration of individual differences. They noted that "autistic participants reported feeling valued within discussions. Importantly, they reported that even when their views differed from their partner's, they felt their views were considered and valued, rather than socially ill-fitting" (p. 7). The twofold goal here is to prime the participants for the next stage, introducing them to the potential

of world building as a way to construct future imaginaries of a world better suited to them, and to learn about "the particularities of the affordances they bring into life" as they navigated a world where they are misfits (Dokumaci, 2018, p. 2).

Using Shared Reading, I was able to draw on my participants' experiences in the public education system in a way that was less investigator driven than a survey or structured interview. Using participants' connection to the text, the way they resonated with the characters' treatment of the autistic protagonist, and how the main character, Xandri, responded to the world(s) around her I was able to draw on their "autobiographical recollection" (Longden et al., 2015, p. 5). By asking autistic former students what their experiences were like we can get a better understanding of how to improve the system. Or, giving the final word to a participant, "I just [pause] I wish things—I just wish things were easier for me. Easier for people like me".

Data Collection

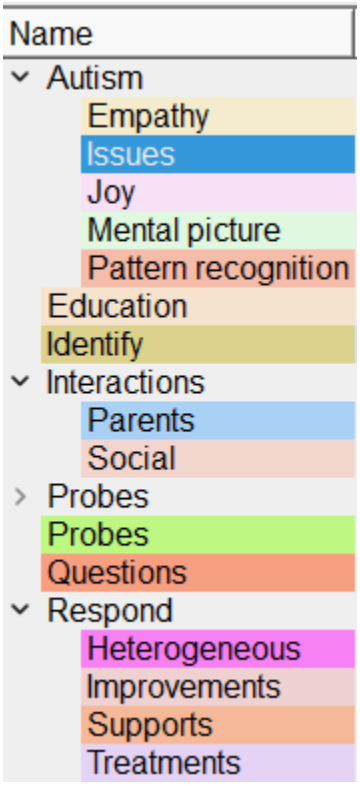
All participants were sent a physical copy of the book *Failure to Communicate* (Sønderby, 2017), a novel about the only autistic human in the galaxy who serves on a spaceship as an expert in understanding new forms of sentient life, despite her difficulties in understanding her own kind. For each of the four participants there were six meetings, with three of them having meetings on average every two weeks and one meeting weekly. There was some variance to this schedule when a participant became unavailable and needed to reschedule. Meetings were scheduled to take one hour, although the first meetings were much shorter. The recordings (nearly 24 hours worth) were sent for transcription, and the transcripts were coded thematically using the software QualCoder 3.3 and later QualCoder 3.5.

Results

The transcripts were coded thematically, beginning with three predefined codes (autism, education, identifying with Xandri). I then flagged any emergent themes and grouped related themes into categories. QualCoder allows for related themes to be merged into a single theme, or for related themes to be grouped into a category. The final list of themes for the project is shown below (see figure 4).

Figure 4

List of themes



The listings are as follows:

1. The category Autism. This category contains themes that are related to the autistic experience and is composed of five subcategories. These deal with autistic hyper- and hypo-empathy, the issues experienced by autistic people in the world, expressions of

autistic joy, autistic difficulties in creating mental images, and autistic pattern recognition.

2. The theme Education. This code was used for materials that described the education system, teacher interactions, and schooling.
3. The theme Identify was used when the speaker made a connection between their experiences and the character in the novel
4. The category Interactions. This category contains themes related to interactions with the participants and their parents, or social interactions with others.
5. The category Probes was used for coding the cultural probes and is not relevant to this section.
6. The theme Probes was used when a participant brought up their experiences with the cultural probes during the discussion of the novel.
7. The theme Questions is described in the code book as "The autistic trait of asking for explanations or justifications before doing something". This code was only used twice and was not included in the analysis.
8. The category Respond collects themes on how other people responded to the participants. These themes deal with the homo- or heterogeneous nature of autism ("when you've met one autistic person, you've met one autistic person"), how, what, and why things have improved for the participants, ways the participants have been supported (generally positive) and ways others have tried to 'fix' them (generally negative).

Not all the above are used in the following analysis. Some, like 'Questions', were created as emergent themes but did not appear again. Others, like 'Mental picture' were not relevant to this project.

Autism

The Autism category contained three sub-themes: Empathy, Issues, and Joy.

Empathy

The sub-theme of Empathy was used to code sections of the transcript where participants responded to the pervasive myth that autistic people lack empathy. Participants disagreed and were more likely to subscribe to the counter-narrative that autistics are hyperempathetic to the point where they need to protect themselves from over-exposure to the pain of others. Evan does this by limiting his empathy to only those he knows:

> *They said that autistic people don't have empathy or whatnot. And true, if I don't know you, I don't give a fuck about you. You can get hit by a car in front of me and I probably wouldn't flinch. If I know you though, I'd go the ends of the Earth for you. Ask anyone who I know. And I believe that that is a defence mechanism my brain has come up with. Because if I was to care about everyone, I would be fucking overwhelmed by it* – Evan Meeting 1

Evan does not limit this empathy to humans, or even inanimate object. Like many autistics he has a more personal relationship with objects:

> *when I was a kid, the best example I can think of is like I used to like pick up sticks on walks and like play swords and have all this fun. But then when it was time to put the stick down I couldn't do it because I picked it up and I might have removed it from all its stick friends. And then it would be alone and then it would have to make new friends. And I knew how hard that was and how much it sucked.* – Evan Meeting 1

As does Karen:

> *Yeah. I do that. I still do that to this day where I like say please and thank you to like, kind of inanimate objects. And it's—I still know people that are like, "Why did you apologize to the dishwasher? It's not alive. It can't hear you." It's like, "Yeah. Well, I thought it could." [laughs]* – Karen Meeting 1

There is a scene in the book that involves Xandri being forced to participate in a ritual hunt against a mistreated and malnourished animal. Three of the participants were strongly affected by this scene. Karen described her notes on the chapter, saying "But I—all I have is just, 'Chapter nineteen, I cried.' Is all I have written on my phone."

She noted that she has

> *always been, like, extra, like, sensitive to it. Like my personal pets, like my two cats came from a farm and my dog was a rescue. So it's like there's some of that stuff where I'm like, I don't—like, I understand the—like using it for a story and, like, she used it very well. Just the theme of, like, a malnourished animal, like upset me. [chuckles]* – Karen Meeting 4

Gill linked her strong feeling towards animals with the helplessness that autistics feel in their own life, "Just—and that's why you have hyper empathy towards the animals. You feel like you don't—you have about as much control over your life as they do."

The participants also strongly empathized with Xandri at the novel's conclusion. Having been blamed for part of the events in the novel Xandri is fired, banished, and leaves to live in exile. This loss of home, comfort, stability, and companionship strongly affected the readers. Evan reported that he

> *Like, I had—I was very emotional after reading it. I had to like, take a nap. That's why I was late. I was on the couch like, just kind of recovering, you know? And when I first wake up from an emotional shutdown nap like that it's like, hard for me to get my head back in the game, you know?* – Evan Meeting 6

While Karen found the ending hard to read:

> *the very last chapter I spent, like it took me longer than I think it would have, because I think it's only, like, thirteen pages, like it's a really short chapter. But it took me quite a long time to read because I was very emotional, I was, like, crying while reading it*

because I was, like, it was a very sad kind of like outcome for Xandri to suddenly she no longer has a place where she belongs. – Karen Meeting 6

Issues

The sub-theme of Issues was used to code responses in the transcript where the participants discussed the difficulties in their lives they attribute to being autistic. As expected, this theme and the theme coding where the participants strongly identified with Xandri were the most common across all transcripts.

Evan lists his difficulties as aggressive outbursts that harm relationships, being misunderstood and not fitting in with teachers and peers, becoming non-verbal when overwhelmed or stressed, forgetting to stop working to eat without being reminded, being so focused on a task that he forgets to take care of himself, meltdowns, overstimulation interfering with the ability to focus, self-hatred and shame, difficulties with wearing 'appropriate' and uncomfortable clothing, being accused of not paying attention because he wasn't looking at the person, circadian rhythms that don't fit the 24-hour day, unable to perform 'eye contact', an inability to 'get over' things and a need for revenge, issues with food selectiveness, inflexibility, a need for constant physical movement, difficulty with sleep and vivid trauma dreams, instinctively trying to solve problems and providing (potential unwelcome) solutions to people, and difficulties forming relationships. As a result, "when [he] was in [his] early twenties, it wasn't clear whether [he] was going to end up in jail, dead, or like on the path to success. Like it could have gone either way, right."

Gill brought up her difficulties with mental health issues, anxiety, choice paralysis, trauma, an inability to move out of her family home or hold a job, sensory sensitivities, a need for physical movement, making inappropriate comments, feeding difficulties and restricted food

choices, paranoia and trust issues, strong sense of justice, constant apologizing, issues with fine motor skills, difficulties with social cues, clothing sensitivities, social exhaustion, a need to solve problems, difficulties with oral communication, difficulties maintaining her 'mask', lack of respect/difference for/to authority, critical of authority and adverse to rule following, chronic sleep issues (especially on Sunday nights before Monday school mornings), frustrating stress dreams, and nightmares, demand avoidance, difficulties with unspoken cues, and meltdowns and shutdowns. She described her difficulties with school:

> *Because like, one of the things that they emphasized while we were in school was just like, "Oh, you have to be diligent, you have to be willing to work for yourself, be self-motivated," blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. But that doesn't really work so well when you have choice paralysis, when you're so anxious you can't get started, keep second guessing yourself. And then you're just stuck doing nothing.* – Gill Meeting 1

Gill also described how this feeling that she lacked control over her life as well as over her body caused her to take actions she knew were harmful, just to be able to make a choice, even if she knew it was a bad one:

> *you feel like you have so little control over your brain and your body. Whether it's just like your brain trying to defy you, like saying that you can't do things, or just, like, other people, society, whatever, getting in your way. Sometimes you're just like, "I want to do something that'll actually matter even though I know it's a bad thing. Like, I'm going to smoke, I'm going to pick up drinking, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."* – Gill Meeting 5

Jason talked about how his brain "often thinks faster than" he does, and that the "bad reaction from" his brain causes him to scream and tic a lot. He described difficulties with ordering food from the cafeteria, tying his shoes, perfectionism, hiding and yelling, complaints about volume when using his voice, self-harm, verbal tics (e.g., "saying woohoo"), and inflexible rule following. He also noted that he was "unable to feel emotion and only inside of my body in high school" which is likely a description of alexithymia, a difficulty identifying emotions common in autistics.

Because his reactions and expressions did not look they way they were expected to, he remembered a time his "history teacher in grade ten mistook my laughing as crying". As is common with autistic people, he noted that he had a resting "neutral face" that made it hard for his parents and others to know how he was feeling. This harmed his ability to make friends while in elementary and secondary school, as he recalled "Exclusion from parties and birthday parties all over k-12 level—all alone which is very scary compared to now where I have a lot of friends and adult staff supporting me." In one of our meetings he noted how he thinks about these social differences:

> *I am different than other people—I have people taken literally as weird and weird looks as joking. … I am shocked by people who have more social skills and who can talk clearly and people take them seriously.* – Jason Meeting 4

Karen shared a similar list of issues that she attributes to being autistic. She noted that she finds being around people (e.g., in lectures or on public transit) assaulting to her senses, "like, 'And everybody's touching me!' Even if I'm, like, off in the corner". Like some of the other participants she also reported difficulties in learning to tie her shoes, issues with sleep and nightmares, pushback from others not being able to tell her mood from her face or voice, and her

brain getting away from her (which she described as having four railroads but seven trains). She also noted that she has difficulties with anger, textures, being seen as emotional and childish, feelings of shame for not being 'normal' like the rest of her family, the crushing weight of perfectionism, having your brain working against you, alexithymia, eye contact, blurting out internal thoughts, and exhaustion caused by overstimulation or too much socializing.

Karen talked about how her sensory sensitivities impact her clothing choices, and the response she gets as a result:

> *I usually dress more for, like, comfort in myself. I like things that are soft and don't, like, itch my skin too much. And I, again, I get comments from, like, my family, where it's like, "Your clothes don't look very, like, nice; they're not very fashionable." And I'm like, "But they're comfy." I'm like, "So, I'm going to wear it."* – Karen Meeting 3

Karen also described the dark humour she, and other autistics, often use. While not harmful, she knows that it would not be taken well by outsiders:

> *I'm like, I always say I'm a 'horrible person'. I just mean, I have a horrible sense of humour. And I'm like, "I'm going—if I'm going to be a mortician, I'm going to walk in and I'm going to start talking to the dead body, be like, 'How you feeling today? Little stiff?'" Like, making jokes that are, like, horrible. But they're, like, to myself, to be like, "It's okay."* – Karen Meeting 3

Many of the specific issues cited by the four participants overlapped with each other or with commonly known autistic traits. These are the aspects of their personality that they find make their lives more difficult, and must actively work to overcome, with varying degrees of success over time.

Joy

Autistic Joy (see, for example, Dale, 2023) is a term used by autistics to describe the euphoric feeling of completeness that sometimes occur when fulling your autistic needs. At different parts in the novel the participants described times they experienced this emotion. Evan, displaying common autistic self-deprecating humor as well as the joys of being his unmasked self noted, "Like, you know, I love being crazy. It's fun. Like everyone else is boring, man. [laughs]". He is aware of the freedom that comes with accepting his autistic nature, and the way autism is seen as an inherently negative state: "People tell me it's a bad thing but I'm like, "Go fuck yourself. I'm autistic. I do what I want." [laughs] … Because I won't conform [laughs], you know, good and the good with the bad. [laughs]". He sees a connection between his difference and his creativity, and (over time) has come to find pride in his existence: "But then I learned that like in that fucked upness is uniqueness, is creativity, is me. [laughs] And like, I'm fucking proud as shit of who I am." Evan, who is interested in psychology, found joy in how his interest in cognitive processes and his autistic thinking interacted:

> *Is like you're only aware of such a small fraction of what goes on inside your brain and, like, this is why I love being autistic. Because I'm like, I just get to consciously observe this brain and what it's doing. Like I'm not in control, man. This thing just spits out fucking ideas into my head and I just try to keep up, you know? So it's like I just—I'm just observing what's going on inside this brain. And when I learned to kind of trust that, that my brain was telling me things and I got to learn to trust my instincts and my intuition and all that other crap, like holy shit, man! Like my life just started going. Good things started happening, and it's because of this puzzle finding machine, you know?* – Evan Meeting 4

Autistic people are known for their passionate interests, often derided as "special" or "restricted" interests. In a section of the novel where Xandri worries about how she would react when visiting a zoo (because animals are one of her interests) – being too excited, spouting out facts and knowledge, or otherwise not performing 'normalcy' correctly, Evan commented that he would love to go to the zoo with someone who found such joy in seeing the animals:

> *So, as I'm reading this, I'm like, are you kidding me? She would be the best person to go to the zoo with, all these facts about the animals and shit, like, that would make it so much more—I'm like, that would be amazing! Like, I love fucking learning shit about—you know. Like, if you just go, "Oh, there's a nice monkey, oh, look at the monkey. Look at the weather, oh it's a nice day out today." Like that's like fucking a trip to the zoo with my parents, like, it's the most boring, mundane shit ever. But like, man, if I'm learning about all the different things, it's like, it just makes it so much more engaging. ... I really identified with that and I really just had this moment where I was like, "I would love to go to the zoo with you Xandri and have you tell me everything about these alien animals," that would be the best fucking day in the world. [laughs]* – Evan Meeting 5

Gill also commented on the joy that comes when autistics can engage in their interests, "Like, we have our own hyper-fixations, and great things can come from that when we're allowed to flourish in those ways." She also describes the joy of "info dumping", an autistic way of communicating that involves sharing a large amount of information on a topic (usually related to the interest): "Like I love listening to my friends when they're info dumping on other stuff and I love info dumping back at them. It's just—that's like how seventy per cent of our interactions go. It's great." Autistic joy can also come from sharing (dumping) the information or being on the receiving end of another autistic's passionate sharing of something that matters to them. Gill

called this “communication via meme” and described it as convenient. Even before we had our book discussions and got to know one another she engaged in this form of sharing when she submitted her first set of probes, “And I sent you a photo of my cat along with my stuff because I thought that would which—that would make you happy.”

One final area of autistic joy that was mentioned was stimming, either together or alone, and how being free to do so can be a source of joy. Jason found that he could not do this in a classroom, “I have much freedom in my bedroom than the teachers telling me what to do—I tend to move around my bed stimming and my legs and very relaxing.” Gill, on the other hand, enjoys doing it with other autistics: “it’s just really fun to have other people to do the stimy things with you and, like, not judge you.”

Interactions

The Interactions category contained two sub-themes: Parents and Social.

Parents

This sub-theme looked at statements that explored how the participants interacted with their families (which was typically their parents but could also include other family members) as well as commentary on the parents of autistics in general. Autism parents (the non-autistic parents of an autistic child) are distinct from autistic parents (who are autistic parents of a child of unknown nature) and are often quite loud about the difficulties they face. Evan’s response to such parents is that

> *I don’t have time for people, parents of autistic children who don’t, you know, I’m an ultramarathon runner too, so I know a thing or two about endurance and going through pain and [laughs] and that sort of shit. So when they tell me they just can’t handle it I’m*

like, "You mean you just don't have the mental tenacity to deal with it," [laughs] "You should start running is what you're telling me." [laughs] – Evan Meeting 1

This seems to originate with how he blames his parents not only for making "stupid fucking decisions … that made things worse" but for them not apologizing and expecting him to feel sorry for them for having to parent him

So maybe they should be apologizing for all the stupid decisions they made that led us to this point instead of me empathizing with them that it was hard to be a parent. "Oh no, it was hard," why the fuck did you have kids then? You know, lots of things in life are hard. Yeah. I can give them a fucking little tidbit of their wisdom. Life's hard. Suck it up. [laughs] Like that's what they used to say to me all the time. So I'm like, "You know what? Now you're surprised you're getting the same reactions from me. – Evan Meeting 2

Evan's parents attempt to put the blame on him for their parenting problems, and their refusal to acknowledge and apologise for that, is why their relationship remains tumultuous:

Like, you know, because my point of view's been fucking ignored for thirty years, still haven't been heard. Now I'm getting told to fucking shut up and just empathize with them to repair the relationship. I don't think so. You fucking kidding me. You got to say sorry. Like, you got to genuinely say sorry, you know, if you want me to empathize with you and the struggles you went through. And like half the struggles they're trying to get me to empathize with is that I was such a shitty child and hard to deal with. And I'm like, "Sorry, for being autistic. Sorry, for fucking being autistic, right." Like, you know, it's just like, why are you trying to make me hate myself? – Evan Meeting 2

Evan also related to Xandri's relationship with her parents:

I think, like, I really—I really related to that, like, in that sense, with like, number one, like, just suffering a lot of abuse growing up. Right? And even from my parents. Like some of the stuff she said just like… you know, I guess some of the stuff that really got to me was like, when she was like, "The kid my parents—," like, it was the way her parents looked at her. Like the kid they wanted was in there somewhere, you know? And like, that's how I feel my parents look at me. And like, I feel like that's the only reason they still support me, or anything like that. … I don't—that's like when I say I don't feel like my parents love me, that's what I mean, is they don't love me. They have rejected me as a person. They love the idea of a kid. They love the ideal kid that they think they see in me, or the baby and all that, you know. But they don't love who I am. They don't love to interact with me, they don't love to have me around. – Evan Meeting 6

Gill also commented on parents who "are always so disappointed when the head cannons they have for their kids don't turn out true. Screw you, your kid is gay, autistic, trans, whatever—you just got to deal with it. Nobody cares what kind of plans you had for them—this is their life, you're just the supplier of it." Jason has a much better relationship with his parents that the others described, but even he noted that his parents are more likely than his friends and professors to take him at face value and not question, while the others see him more as a human being. He did say that his parents, too, do occasionally want him to be someone else sometimes. Karen described the way she would parent future potential kids of hers, that there is "the possibility of having a kid and the kid being autistic, or the kid having a disability. It's like, it doesn't matter as long as they're healthy. Like, if they act a little different, so what, as long as my kid's healthy, I will love my kid. Whenever I have them."

Gill explained that she had a hard time getting her parents to believe her when she told them she thought she was autistic, “Because like even in just my own experience, it took so much time and effort for—to convince my parents that like I’m autistic, I need help. They dismissed me so quickly”. She also mentioned that as a child her parents would take over from her and help her solve problems rather than teaching her how to do it herself. She rhetorically asks, “How am I supposed to know these things? And then you get mad at me because I’m mad at you and then I feel bad.” She expanded on this and spoke about how not only did this not teach her how to solve the problem, but it amounted to telling her she is wrong, her feelings are invalid, and she doesn’t know what is best for herself.

Social

Evan noted that the only people he keeps in his life are “the people who take the time to understand me”. Karen describes the counterpoint to this – the “customer service voice” she puts on at work when dealing with the public which she drops the second the person leaves. “Instantly just like drop it. I’m like, I’m…. And my coworkers think it’s funny and I’m just like, ‘I don’t know why this is funny. That’s just—I have to do it for the customer and then I can be normal again.’” These are diametrically opposed forms of interaction – those who are given access to the real person and those who only encounter the mask.

Evan noted that his lack of social connections has prevented him from receiving academic awards for his work:

> *…basically we’re in class and our professor who is our program director gives us a whole speech on how social bias plays a huge part in who gets these fucking awards. And I’m like, “Lovely. Lovely. Lovely.” All I wanted to say is, “So what about the people who,*

you know, don't know a lot of people, who are that way because that's the way they are?" Right? – Evan Meeting 4

Evan has learned that to better mask around non-autistic people in social situations he needs to actively control the way he shares more information that is expected by his conversation partner. While tangents and info dumping can lead to autistic joy in autistic-to-autistic communication, when taking to allistics it is incumbent on the autistic person to modify their behaviour to meet expectations. He notes that:

Sometimes I'm like—one of the things I've been trying to socially do recently, to improve my socializing in small talk situations, is notice when I'm about to go on a speech tangent. And if I feel the need to, I'm like, "No, it's not necessary. Just stop. You don't need to." I'm like, "Just stop." It doesn't make sense. I'm like, "It doesn't have to make sense. They don't like it." – Evan Meeting 4

Gill noted that "at some point it's easier just to go along with what everybody else says, instead of fighting it all the time. Which sucks." Masking to get along rather than trying to stand your ground 'sucks', but no one has the energy to resist constantly.

In line with the social model of disability Evan asks, "Are we really socially disadvantaged or is it just we don't socialize the way you guys do?" Gill noted that communication is hard, and being peppered with questions makes her doubt herself, questing if she did something wrong or did not explain herself well enough.

The novel presented diplomacy as a drawn-out process where no one would say what they really wanted. Evan compared what he thought autistic diplomacy would look like in comparison:

> *We would all be direct and we would all be honest, but we would be cordial about it because that's what being polite is. Being polite isn't being a two-faced asshole lying your ass just trying to get what you want secretly. Like, autistic people would be like, "This is what we want. This is what we want." You know, and if you got upset, maybe there'd be like, you know, a five-minute cool down period where everyone can leave. –* Evan Meeting 4

In discussing Xandri's building a community of people who understand her, Evan agreed that he had also bult a community of people who get him, "people who have just taken the time to understand" him. He also found, like with Xandri, that it started with finding a place he belonged, and where "people just take two seconds to try to understand me, you know?" Jason also found a place he belongs, and the community he formed with his peers at his school means that socializing "feels great" because they are encouraging and supportive.

Respond

The Respond category contained three sub-themes: Improvements, Supports, and Treatments. The overall category covers how people respond to the participants and the fact they are autistic.

Improvements

The improvements sub-theme covers statements made by the participants that indicate ways their treatment by others have improved over time as well as how they would like to see things changed to improve life for all autistics.

Evan believes there must be more focus on autistic people's strengths and less on their weaknesses. In his words, "Well, I'm going to show them how to, like, fucking use their

strengths and just minimize the things that causes them harm, right? … And like, I'm not going to make them change. If anything, I'm going to amplify their weirdness because like [laughs] that's their strengths, you know." Focusing on the person's strength and not treating them as if there is something wrong with them is how he wants to see autism supports improve. Sometimes this is on society, but the individual can take part in this process too. Jason, as a non-speaker, explained that he "develop[ed] my own methods of communication using proloquo2go, Zoom and text over the years." Even just being compassionate when you don't really understand is helpful. Karen noted that in the text the captain doesn't really understand Xandri but still respects and values her, even telling her to work on notes she knows Xandri didn't make so she has an excuse to leave the room and have some alone time.

Evan pointed out that his university provided support that led to his success: "And like [school name] gave me a chance, right. Like there were people at [school name]who intervened [laughs] in a very positive way and set me on the right path and three degrees at[school name]." However, this cannot be imposed, as he points out "It was only once I wanted to change on my own terms that I was successful at it".

Evan credits his ultramarathon running and studying Maui Thai with helping him get better control over his emotions. He says that the repetitive motion of running is soothing and that:

> *…in Maui Thai, like it taught me to deal with my negative emotions a lot. Like if you can get punched in the face and stay calm and respond intellectually to something like you stay calm in just about any situation, right. So, like it helped me learn how to think and engage my prefrontal cortex over, you know, while my limbic system was fucking raging.*
> – Evan Meeting 2

These activities also help him to kill the limiting voice in his head, but that is a process that never ends:

> *Like that's what I did on my first ultramarathon* [killing the voice]. *And the thing is, you think you can kill that thing, like you can throw it off the cliff, but it hung on by one fucking finger and it'll creep back up on you. So you got to keep fucking kicking it. You got to guard the border and step on its fingers, right?* – Evan Meeting 3

Not everyone uses such active methods, as Jason reports that to control his emotions, "I do some meditation and relax and take a little nap and eat some wholesome food."

Evan uses the pride he feels in his success "to cancel out any negative thoughts". This also leads to him self-imposing high expectations, which can lead to a fear of failure:

> *Like that I am scared that, like, you know, like, what if I bitch out? What if I quit? And like, you know, what I've come to accept is, like, that sometimes you will. Sometimes you will fail, sometimes you will fuck up, but, like, it doesn't matter. You just get back up on the horse, right?* – Evan Meeting 4

Evan has learned to quench the fear of failing with the knowledge that failing is not the end, but a part of the process. He has also learned making people close to him (he mentions his fiancé) proud inspires him to do well. In the text the author describes Xandri summoning a coldness and Evan identified that as what self-regulation allows him to do: to channel his raw anger into productive energy, as she did.

Evan provided some other examples of things that would make life easier for autistic people. One example was that there is no cultural understanding of how autistics can become burnt out and need time away to recover (he used the term detox). In an ideal world you could

"be like, 'Hey, you know? I've been having an overwhelming day, you know? You know, like, intense emotions or whatnot.'" And your employer would respond "Oh don't worry. I get it. You know, take the day off. Paid sick day. It's just the way it is." He also would find it easer to navigate conversations if it were normalized to signify you've finished talking by saying 'I'm done talking now' because "one of the hardest parts about conversing is knowing when to jump in." Evan also noted that forcing autistic people to adapt to a standard sleep cycle that even many non-autistics find difficult is not helpful. He suggests, "Maybe that kid's really cranky because you're fucking forcing him on a schedule that his biology is fighting because he has a different circadian rhythm. … Just to let him be natural for a week or so, so you can see how this kid's rhythm might vary over seven days or something, right?" He pointed out that since he has been able to take control of his sleep cycle, and with the help of a weighted blanket, he sleeps and functions better. Gill, linking her thoughts to the potion of the text where Xandri is overwhelmed by the smells of a variety of foods while passing through a section of a space station, felt she should have been able/allowed to have a mask to block out some of the smell. This can also apply to sound, and many autistics wear sound damping headphones, such as Jason who notes that "I use AirPods and noise cancelling headphones to migrate the noise around me." Gill also pointed out one of the benefits of the pandemic switch to online learning was being able to eat in class:

> *Because, like, I can't focus if I'm hungry and, like, I can't really disturb other people with, like, the sounds of me chewing if I'm muted or the smell of my food because, like, they're dozens of miles away.* – Gill Meeting 4

Being at home also allows for more active forms of self-regulation. Jason moves around his room to relax and can do this without disturbing the class or being seen as weird. But the in-

class experience also has benefits, as Jason described, “My teachers really calmed me down and encouraged me to go for a walk when I had a outbursts [sic] in high school” – something less likely to happen in an online environment.

Supports

The support sub-theme is used to code comments the participants made about ways they have been, or could have been, supported in their education specifically or in their lives in general.

Evan was explicit about the importance of a strong supportive system: “Like my life, like this place it really, it gave me a second chance. And I have such a strong support network here that like if I had to go somewhere else, I would fail, right.” Part of the support he receives from his academic supervisor is freedom and guidance while not stifling his ability to forge his own path. He commented, “And like I just feel like when I am given autonomy to do my own thing, like my genius shines through and like that’s what my supervisor has done for me. Is she has truly guided me and not limited me.” Jason made a similar comment that he was never given a free pass at his university because “they expect highly of me.”

Evan also provided suggestions on physical aids that can be used to support autistic people. He mentioned a type of ear bud that has both noise cancelling and sound modulating abilities. In his example he explained that at a party there were multiple conversations happening around the room at the same time and he could hear everything. This was too much for him to process so he used these buds to block out background conversations.

Evan talked about how his fiancée doesn’t have the same issues with socializing but understands his needs: “Like she's just not like me in social situations, right. But like she gets

me, and she gets how I am feeling in social situations. So she like takes care of me and looks after me, is considerate of me." He mentioned feeling abandoned when he attends a social event where he doesn't know anyone and the person he came with leaves him alone. He contrasts this with how his fiancée acts: "She stays with me like, you know, she makes sure I'm okay and if she is going to leave, she explains why and tells me when she'll be back. Like she's just so thoughtful and like, you know, I'm like she's neurotypical. More neurotypical people could do that." Karen also has understanding allistics in her life that support her. She explains that:

> *I—one of my roommates is kind of like that. [chuckles] She doesn't—like, she doesn't really—well, she doesn't fully understand, but she's like, "Yeah, that's what Kate does." ... because I feel like I don't have to explain the weird things that I do. She's just like, "Yeah. That's just Kate."* – Karen Meeting 4

Supports that Evan wishes he had in school include being able to move around when he needed to. Sitting still in his chair was hard for him and impacted how well he was able to focus or perform academically. He noted that weighted clothing helps him sit still for longer periods of time, though he says: "if anyone tells me to sit still to this day, like I'll probably still want to punch you in the face. Like [laughs] I might do it if you catch me on a bad day. [laughs]". Karen also needs physical movement to concentrate in class. Xandri being reprimanded for not having 'quiet hands' reminded her how when she bounced her leg she "used to always get like reprimanded for it when I was little. Where it's like, 'Stop doing that. You're shaking the whole building.'" She noted that most of her stims are not very noticeable by others except for the leg one or if she is using a fidget device (she mentioned using one that is a mesh tube with a marble inside that she takes to exams).

Other activities Evan does in class to help him focus include doodling or answering questions. He explains his need to be doing more than one thing (listen in in class) at a time: "what I'm doing is I'm fighting four other urges while I try to focus on one. And fighting off four urges takes the majority of my mental capacity, so I can't listen to one, right?" He also finds that being under pressure helps with his focus. He believes that need for pressure is why he does free climbing (as opposed to sport climbing that uses more safety equipment):

> *And I was like, "Let's fucking climb this rock wall man. Like we're over water. Who cares if we fall, right?" When I got halfway up the wall, I was like, "Shit. If I fall, I'm going to die." [laughs] Because I was going to bang off the wall. Right. But like it was that pressure, like I've never felt so alive. I've never had so much fun in my fucking life. I loved it so much. I climbed up the fucking wall once realized I would die and then I jumped off of it because we were jumping off it before. And then I got down and I was like, "I'm going to fucking climb that again."* – Evan Meeting 2

Karen uses music as a tool to help her focus. She has multiple music playlists that are labelled with the different activities that they are for, so the music matches what she is doing. She explains, "I have like a studying playlist that has songs that I can study too. And then I have one that I know is labeled is just like walking because it helps me keep my pace when I'm walking somewhere because I don't like walking. [laughs]". Because, if the music is new it might draw her concentration, she only uses songs she is familiar with, but at the same time she explained she has a "habit of, 'This is this new song I just found. Let me listen to it four hundred times in a day.' [laughs] And then at that point it's like, 'Well, now it's not new.'"

A potentially controversial take Evan shared is that just as there are allistics who are stronger or weaker academically there are also autistic "dumb ones and smart ones" (Evan

Meeting 5) and so the need for supports vary. He argues that the system has no problem with an allistic who needs more support receiving extra help, but when it comes to an autistic student who needs more academic support the conversation turns to labels like “severely autistic”.

Treatments

The treatments sub-theme captures comments the participants made on ways people try to ‘treat’ autism and autistics, almost always with non-beneficial results.

Evan shared a story he had read about: to prevent an autistic child from engaging in self-harming behaviours she had an inhibitor chip implanted in her brain. They reported the results were a breakthrough because they interpreted she was happier through fMRI scans of her brain, which he called junk science. Because she was non-verbal they defended this intrusive surgery without informed consent, to which he responded “That’s bullshit man. Like, you know, like there’s so many ways to communicate like get fucking creative.”

Evan struggles with how he defines autism, saying in the same meeting “It’s not a fucking disability, it’s just a different way of thinking, right?” and “it is a disability in terms of that it puts you at a disadvantage in society, but, like, it’s not a disability in terms of, like, if society was built by us, it wouldn’t be a disability.” He is clear that “what, like, really, really bugs me about a lot of autism treatment is it’s more about fixing the parents’ problems than the kids’ problems.” He also asks the question “is [autism] even a social learning disorder? Or is it just you people don’t know how to talk to each other properly? You’re too concerned about hurting each other’s feelings, so you lie through your teeth.” He just wants those who try to ‘fix’ autistic people the “stop forcing us to try to be like them because that’s just not cool.” He also objects to the lack of autistic input on research done with funding that was theoretically intended to make autistic lives better. He would say to teams without autistic members:

You're doing this research for the benefit of neurotypicals. It's not for the benefit of autistic people." You're like, "Oh, it's strength-based research, because I'm trying to outline how good autistic people are to neurotypicals." How does that fucking help us? How does that fucking help us, dog? Like, make it useful to us, man. – Evan Meeting 6

This lack of inclusion of autistic researchers extends to the way expertise is attributed to mental heath professionals but not to lived experience. Evan argues that his "therapist constantly tells me she's more embedded in the autistic community" than he is, which he thinks is an "egotistical thing, like that she knows more than me" and as result "she won't listen to my ideas about how I would like my therapy to progress." As he points out, he has "thirty years of being autistic as experience" but that is given no value.

Evan summarizes his objections to how 'treatment' for autistics is conceptualized: "You're going to have difficulties twisting in a screw when you're trying to beat it with a fucking hammer. Instead, you just got to pull out the screwdriver and then that screw's not going to be so fucking difficult anymore, right." This lack of understanding of what autistics need to be successful led to Jason being told "you need to correct your voice in the correct way that neurotypical people speak", "to stop stimming to calm my hands down because that is called copying and socially inappropriate", and that he need to correct his facial expressions to properly fit in. Karen, too, has been "reprimanded" to "stop shaking, like don't bounce your leg, stop moving your hands, just sit there and be still. Which I can't really do, it doesn't work for me."

Evan was clear with how he viewed the intent of most autism research:

maybe no one ever explicitly said, "Hey, let's eradicate autism," like, there was no autism holocaust. But like—like, let's just look at like, the subtext of all of the research, and all

> *the treatment that's been done on autism, and what that subtext tells you. "Let's fix autism," aka, let's get rid of autism. Like there was a globally, culturally approved genocide of autism pretty much. Like, you know? Not like—like, metaphorical genocide, like, in a sense, right? … They're trying to medically—whether it's behaviourally, or like, fucking chemically castrate us with drugs. They're trying to eliminate our behaviours.* – Evan Meeting 6

Karen doesn't want to be changed. She askes, "if you were to suddenly, like, change all of that, it would be—would it fundamentally change you as a person?" She knows the issue isn't being like everyone else, but acceptance as she is: "I just [pause] I wish things—I just wish things were easier for me. Easier for people like me. But I don't know if I would ever be willing to, like, change my genetics and my brain makeup in order to do that."

Karen responded to the Alliance's offer of Prenatal Genetic Engineering (PGE) technology to show the alien society the benefits of joining them. This would provide "Five years without a single defect among their children." She noted that "the word defect really stood out to" her, along with the Alliance's law requiring the use of PGE. She noted "It kind of drives home the thought process of people in this world or this universe where it's like you're not perfect so you're defective. And like just the word defect is like broken and useless, that kind of thing. Like…, it's a very hard-hitting word for it."

Education

Education was a standalone theme used to code portions of the transcripts where the participant discussed their education and/or experiences in school or learning. Three of the four participants described themselves as lovers of learning. Evan directly blamed school for

preventing him from realizing this, noting "I love math now and that was a late in life kind of discovery because the education system kind of let me down." He is currently in a graduate program, whereas Gill is currently out of school, but has two certificates, one diploma, and is returning to school for a co-op program that she hopes will lead into employment. Karen, in an undergraduate forensic biology program she hopes leads to a career doing autopsies and working with the deceased, knows what she is interested in can be off-putting to some, but to her "it's cool. It's fascinating". Despite this love of learning in general, in a school context all three found it hard to succeed. Karen noted the difference between studying on her own and for school, "I think it's because I get marked on it, I'm more like nervous about it. But studying stuff in like my free time or other stuff because I'm in forensics, a lot of forensic stuff intrigues me with a lot of it being like unsolved crime cases." Karen had similar thoughts on her formal education in animation:

> *I have a formal education in art. I was in pre-animation, and then I was in pre-illustration, and then I went to illustration, because animation didn't actually work out, because that is just a nightmare and a half. Both in how they teach it and like, how the industry is actually run. Like… sweatshops, it's horrible.* – Karen Meeting 1

Evan shared a similar sentiment, that "being in lecture was something I had to cope with a lot. I hate fucking being in lecture, but I also love being in lecture." He, too, described how much joy he gets from studying math on his own, outside of the formal structures:

> *Yeah, and like, if it's like just the fun like, I'll learn about maths for fun, I'll learn about history for fun. … Like, yeah, I'll definitely like read stuff for fun and whatnot and like learn about shit that other people are like—I taught myself how to count in, there's like, the numeral system we use is called based ten and I taught myself how to count in base*

like eight and base nine and base seven and that. Because I found out about it and I was like, well that's cool, why would we have that? And, like, how does that change math and whatnot? I'm like, there's just so much different stuff with math, you know? – Evan Meeting 5

Evan compared his present interest in learning with how he behaved in high school, contrasting how he skipped school frequently (because of mandatory forced attendance) with how he is getting his master's. He argues that the education system suppressed his ability to be successful in math (he "didn't find out I was a fucking math savant until I was twenty-seven") "because it didn't allow me to function how I needed to function to be focused on my work". He also noted that it is impossible to focus on academics while simultaneously struggling with personal problems:

How can I—how can you expect me to learn about math when I'm like, fucking, just trying not to let everyone find out I'm kind of gay, you know? And I'm like, sitting—and I literally remember sitting in math class being like, "I'm going to go home and like, hook up with like, my boyfriend." – Meeting 6

He makes the claim that he couldn't learn math while dealing with the personal issues in his life and was discouraged by ablest abuse, "of course I couldn't learn about math. Like, all this other shit was going on. And like, you know, also, like, you know, I'm just trying to fucking, like—I've been called retarded so often that like, I've just given up at that point. Like, you know?"

All four of the participants mentioned the importances of supportive teachers. Evan, as the only one of the four to lead a class (as a tutorial leader) shared his thoughts on so called 'bad

students'. He doesn't think he will ever have a bad student "Because to me they don't exist. You know? There's just students who—like, maybe they're going through something. I don't know. Whatever it is, right?" In a conversation he had in his head with his program director he said:

> *No matter how bad the student, people come around, and they like me, as a teacher. Because guess what? So many of you are fucking assholes. And you don't know it. [chuckles] Because guess what? You think there are such a thing as a bad fucking student. Tells me you're a bad fucking teacher, you know? [laughs]* – Evan Meeting 6

While he acknowledges that there are "annoying students" who are going to "get on your nerves", he reminds us that

> *Those students deserve patience, and kindness, to be taught in a way that is going to benefit them. And if you can't do that, at the very least, you should just try to be a positive impact on their life, and maybe have them leaving the classroom with the idea that not all teachers are assholes. And that maybe school is worth a shot, you know? At the very least.* – Evan Meeting 6

Jason described the importance of "focusing on strength based learning and education" and explained that at his university his professors didn't have preconceived notions about what he, a non-speaking Indigenous autistic person, could do, and that rather than lowered expectations "they expect highly of me." Evan makes a similar comment on the importance of working with people where they are, not where you assume they are:

> *Like, it's like, you just got to be willing to work with people on their level. And then you'd be fucking surprised how goddamn smart they are, right? And like, it's just this neurotypical, and like, societal fucking assumption that, "Oh, you don't look like me, you*

don't think like me, you don't talk like me, you don't sound like me? Well you must be a fucking retard, then." – Evan Meeting 6

Evan was very clear on his opinions on teachers who demand that students act in a neurotypical way, specifically regarding eye contact (something many autistics avoid):

I'm so tired, I do so much regular bullshit on a regular basis, if you get upset because I didn't look you in the eyes, like, fucking grow up, you know. So, like, that one about looking in the eyes and, like, you know, teachers, "Don't you respect me? Look me in the eyes" like, shut the fuck up. – Evan Meeting 5

When autistics require accommodations that contrast with normative systems there is often confusion. Karen commented:

But I remember my teacher, when I was in grade four, was like, "Why are you doing—why are you different? Why is this not working?" And I think it was less malicious of, like, "Well, I just don't want to teach you because you're being difficult," and more of like, "I don't understand how to teach you." – Karen Meeting 4

Karen is aware that her needs are not necessarily obvious to an outside audience, for example, she doesn't "like doing, like, presentations because I can't stand being stared at [laughs] which is interesting for someone who's in a musical. [laughs]". Regardless of the complexity of meeting autistic students' needs, teacher buy-in is a must. Karen describes how her teacher, shortly after her diagnosis, "was not very accepting of, 'Now I have to change how I'm teaching for this one student.' … So she was not very pleased with my accommodations of, like, having something to, like, fidget with so I can focus in class, or, you know, not having to answer questions when I get called upon, type stuff."

Autistic ways of processing often cause issues in math class. Autism is, in part, a different way of processing information, and so when a teacher expects students to work through their math in a specific way it can cause conflict. Karen notes that she had such difficulties in school, especially elementary school math. She would do math in other, more efficient, ways than how the teacher explained it, which would frustrate the teacher. Karen didn't understand why she had to use a way that didn't make sense to her when she found an alternative that did. She also struggled with her teacher on questions that demanded she show her work. She could not explain to the teacher "There's no work. It's just, this is what it is. [chuckles] … That's just the answer. There's no work to be shown."

When autistic students act outside assumed norms they risk being seen as troublemakers. Evan said that teachers hated him because he would not remain in his seat but never considered meeting him in the middle so that his needs were met in a way that was less disruptive. Jason reported that his teachers were much more supportive. While he "often had socially inappropriate behaviour" in high school, including hitting himself and self harm, he notes "My teachers really calmed me down and encouraged me to go for a walk when I had a outbursts [sic]" or took him "to a different room to calm down and to do work." He noted that in public school, he "experienced social struggles and have to advocate for my own accommodation" but now he "thrive [sic] in a campus setting compared to the K—12 setting."

There is a scene in the novel where Xandri is unable to speak because while she knows what she wants to say she cannot get the words to come out. Karen compared that to her difficulties in answering questions in class, "I know what I want to say, but I need to say it in a way that's not mean or come off as mean. So I definitely relate to, I need the words to come out, but I need them to come out correct. I have them; I just, I can't get them out." This was not

universal among the participants, as Evan explained that asking questions was what helped him succeed in university. Taking information in passively was not working, so he put his hand up as often as possible to get engaged.

Autistics often experience hyper- and/or hypo-sensory sensitivities, but consideration for non-normative needs are uncommon. School assemblies are loud, boisterous affairs and can be uncomfortable experiences. Gill noted that "Like, it never occurred to me that just, like, not going to an assembly was an option. Because, like, everybody just has to go. But going—not going to a few certain assemblies probably would've helped me a lot more growing up." Jason and Karen mentioned how the smells in the school could cause discomfort. Karen found walking through the school hard, because "when you go through the halls, it was like, you would smell, like, eight different things, and it was just horrible." In Jason's case it was the lunchroom, and "cafeteria staff helped [him] overcome the smells". Dealing with the stress of these sensitives can quickly drain an autistic student's energy, but there is no official system to deal with this. Evan has thought about how he will deal with this for his theoretical future children:

> *When I have kids, like, obviously they're going to have to go to school to some degree, but like, if they need out of school, if they need like half days I'm going to be like, "Listen," and if anyone says anything I'm going to be like, "Listen, you know, my report cards are filled with Ds and Cs from grade one to eight and like, basically up to grade twelve, like. Now I'm a doctor, so. I got the biggest D of them all you motherfuckers." [laughs] … And it's like I'm a smart guy, I love learning about shit. Like, I'll give my kids something to do, like, you know. I'm not going to be like just come home and, like, you know, dick around. I'm going to be like, "Here, like, what's the fun activity you want to do for the day? Like, you know. This is your day off, like, have fun with it, you know? If you*

> *need just to sit in a dark room and like build some Legos or like whatever, like fucking do that, you know, like have some fun with it." But, like, you know, like, these things that people write off as meaningless activities like Lego, videogames, stuff like that, like it builds creativity, it builds reaction time, it builds critical thinking skills, like, it builds spatial awareness, it builds so many other skills that are like invaluable like that.* – Evan Meeting 5

The importance Evan puts on the mental health and wellbeing of his future children outweighs his concerns of what they might miss in school that day. Forcing them to attend school when they are mentally and/or emotionally at their limit serves no purpose.

Identify

The Identify theme was used to code responses where the participants strongly identified with Xandri. This was the most common code of all, with 276 sections of the transcripts tagged. This can be taken as validation of the choice of novel because the intent was to find a text that the participants would relate to, and they repeatedly reported that they did. For example, Karen found that, for a "fantasy book" it was very accurate in its depictions of autism, saying "I think that it was done very well the way that it was described. Because sometimes I—when I'm reading through, I get to that part and I'm like, 'Well, that's a little, that's a little too accurate.' [laughs]". Evan, who does not generally enjoy fiction reported that he enjoyed it more than expected because he identified with Xandri. Jason called it a good description of autistic people like him and Gill said that it "just really hit me deeply in the feels, about like, being autistic."

Karen found the interactions between Xandri and one of her potential love interests, Driver, very relatable, saying that she sees "a lot of the interactions I have with my boyfriend

between Xandri and Diver." She elaborated that "there's a lot of things that she mentions. I'm like, 'Well, that's—that kind of relates to how I am with my boyfriend.'" Such as her being OK with his touch but not that of other people, and that "he's working on the tech stuff and she's doing all of her more thought process stuff, which also relates to my boyfriend and I with what we're studying. Because he's doing engineering and I'm doing forensics".

The novel did not attempt to show only positive depictions of autistic life, and the participants often reported that Xandri's experiences brought up unpleasant memories of their own lives. One of the unpleasant situations that resonated with some of the participants was when Xandri was told to quiet her hands. Karen responded that she bounced her leg and was often told to "Stop doing that. You're shaking the whole building." She elaborated, "But I have had, like, been reprimanded because of like stop shaking, like don't bounce your leg, stop moving your hands, just sit there and be still. Which I can't really do, it doesn't work for me." Gill's response was "I read about it was just like, 'Oh shit!'" and that "[sighs] I still kind of get that when my mom tries to get me to stop shaking my leg and I'm just like, 'No, I must do this.' And, like, it's really not hurting anybody." She concluded with "Again, quiet hands or whatever. It hurts. It sucks."

Autistic people are often treated as if they were children. Xandri experiences this in the novel, and the participants commented on how this transpires in their own lives. Jason does not consider himself childlike, and his peers see him as mature now, but he noted that in the past people did see him like a child and talked to him that way. Karen noted that she is an emotional person and people have called her childish because of it. Gill also noted that she is infantilized, that her "choices aren't as valued as somebody else's" and she has experienced a lack of

autonomy, being spoken over, and having others make decisions on her behalf, something she described as "just [sighs] kind of not great" experiences.

The participants reported becoming emotional in the final section of the novel. The climax included the death of a secondary character, Katya. This was very emotional for Karen: she read the book aloud, giving Katya an accent, and had become attached to her. Karen also got emotional over Xandri's ending. She noted,

> *But I was not expecting to get as emotional as I did over it. And I think it's just because, like, spending so long reading the book and getting close to the characters… the very last chapter I spent, like it took me longer than I think it would have, because I think it's only, like, thirteen pages, like it's a really short chapter. But it took me quite a long time to read because I was very emotional, I was, like, crying while reading it because I was, like, it was a very sad kind of like outcome for Xandri. Suddenly she no longer has a place where she belongs.* – Karen Meeting 6

Evan reported similar feelings about the final section of the novel, noting that "like throughout it, just them trying to get rid of her, all of it was just like… you know, like… just really hit me deeply in the feels, about like, being autistic. And like, people trying to change me, and get rid of me. Right? And then like, just despite all that, she—she rose above it." He further clarified "So, yeah. That scene was like, really heavy for me to read about, to be honest, like, you know? I really, really connected with it in that scene." Jason had a more positive response to the ending and was wowed by Xandri overcoming all the challenges she encountered.

Chapter 8 Speculative Fiction and Collaborative World Building

The final task I set for the participants was for them to work together and tell the story of a potential future. They would work collaboratively to decide the genre of the story they would write, and the level of specificity they would focus on (a person, a street, a town, a nation, or a planet). This would be a story of a future time, so they would need to decide how far in the future to look, and what would happen between the 'now' of the real world and the 'now' of the story.

Context

Speculative fiction is a broad term that refers to storytelling where one or more elements of the fictional world are somehow different from their analog in the primary world (Hergenrader, 2018, p. 23). Suvin (1979) termed this difference the "novum" and claimed that the "essential tension of SF" is between the reader and the "Unknown or Other introduced by the novum", which "estranges the empirical norm" (p. 64). Collaborative world building is a process where a group of authors layout and design a fictional world in which to produce speculative fiction, and in the process the participants must consider the functioning of the shared primary (real) world and in doing gain a richer sense of how different people experience reality (Hergenrader, 2018, p. 19). Hergenrader (2018) argues that any depiction of a world (real or imaginary) is not a source of universal truths, but "a broad interpretation of a specific location in a given moment in time" that is "open to a multitude of subjective, individual experiences" (p. 18). He also notes that by having multiple creators, the worlds designed collaboratively are "naturally diverse and complex" because they are drawn from multiple imaginations and perspectives (p. 19). Hergenrader (2018) provides a vocabulary and a guide to the process of collaborative world building, introducing terminology to create a framework (See table 5).

Table 5

Structural categories with related substructures

Framework		
Scope	Breath	Physical space
	Depth	Level of detail
	Focal points	Specific locations, "worlds within the world"
Sequence	Timeline	Past, going back to the leftmost termination point (last relevant point in the past) Present, setting of the story Future, going forward to the rightmost termination point (what is known about the future)
Perspective	Point of view	Usually some variation of third person near-omniscient

Operating below the framework are the structures of the world. Hergenrader (2018) defines four *structural categories* with fourteen related *substructures* and several optional *substructures* to plot out the social forces of a world (See table 6).

Table 6

Hergenrader's Framework

Structures	Substructures
Governance	Government presence
	Rule of law
	Social services
Economic	Economic strength
	Wealth distribution
	Agriculture and trade
Social relations	Race and ethnic relations
	Class relations
	Gender relations
	Sexual orientation relations
	Age*
	Ableness*
	Non-human*
Cultural influences	Military influence
	Religious influence
	Technology influence
	Arts and culture
	Drugs and drug culture*
	Natural world*
	Magic*

**Optional*

Any type of fictional world can be created by varying the details of the above categories; however, the world builder(s) must account for how changes to one category would cascade over into the others. By using this system to generate a possible future the collaborators can tweak the way different social forces shape their imagined world.

As Hergenrader (2018) explains, worldbuilding is more than just creating a setting, it must also take into account the political and social forces that co-create that world. The world must be both *coherent* and *consistent*; the former means that each piece fits logically within the rules of the whole, while the latter means those pieces fit with each other. The creation process involves the participants discussing the real world, and "[t]his intellectual exercise gives us a richer sense of how different people might experience our world." (Hergenrader, 2018, p. 19). Fischer and Mehnert (2021) see images of the future as "part of our social reality embedded in intersubjectively shared, socially and culturally prefigured meanings" (p. 27) and link them to Jasanoff's (2015) concept of sociotechnical imaginaries: "'collectively held and performed visions of desirable futures' (or of resistance against the undesirable) that are 'animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology' (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 19)." Wolf-Meyer (2019) considers "three forms of future historiography: intensification, extrapolation, and mutation" (p. 19) as ways to expose current problems and devise future possibilities. Extrapolation is the transplantation of a force or institution into the future unchanged, while intensification imagines the force or institution becoming increased or more pervasive and considering the ramifications (Wolf-Meyer, 2019). Mutation alters the force or institution in unexpected or unpredictable ways and considers how people and societies react (Wolf-Meyer, 2019).

Data Collection

Starting with the structured world building protocols of *Collaborative Worldbuilding for Writers and Gamers* (Hergenrader, 2018), and following the speculation based framework of Fischer & Mehnert (2021), I sought to create "knowledge about our currently shared assumptions, [trace] current discourses and [uncover] the social imaginaries of the present" (p. 25). Fischer & Mehnert (2021) weave their framework from threads of Critical Futures Studies (CFS), Technology Assessment (TA), and Science and Technology Studies (STS) as a tool that allow for the study of how future imaginaries influence both the future present (when then becomes now) and current social realities. While Fischer & Mehnert (2021) follow the world building structures of Wolf (2012), I instead used Hergenrader (2018) as the basis for my world building protocol as my participants were all familiar with the types of games (video and role playing) that the book was designed for.

The following methodology was summarized in a both a text document and a graphical explainer (Appendix I) to ensure all participants were clear on what was being asked of them. The overall worldbuilding process is composed of two parts: the foundation and the metanarrative, and each of those parts contains four sub-tasks.

At the first meeting (on Zoom) the four participants worked to create the foundation. This requires the participants to design the framework of their world – the timeline and scope of the world which determines the level of detail in time and space they will be working on, and the structures – the socio-political realities of the world. It is during this task that the story of the world begins to take shape. They began by deciding what genres they wanted to use as guides in the design of the world and chose "slice of life/coming of age" and "dystopia" as stylistic guidelines. Next they began to create the framework as described by Hergenrader (2018),

choosing the three components of scope: breath, depth, and focal points. The focus would be on a family or a single school, looking at individual people and their families' lives, with the action occurring at school, home, parks, youth centers, and the Metaverse. The timeline of their work would focus on the period from 2050 to 2070, and they created a set of 'historical' events to take the world from the present of 2023 to the starting point of 2050 and the creating of the autistic nation, which might involve the annexation of PEI.

Hergenrader (2018) simulates the societal forces at play in the world though the use of four structural categories with fourteen related substructures, as seen in table 6.

Figure 5

Card results

The values for these substructures range from 1 to 5 and can be holding steady or changing (either trending up or down), and the values can be chosen by the participants or randomly. The values for government presence (5, decreasing), Rule of law (4, decreasing), Social services (2,

stable), and Ableism (5, decreasing) were chosen by the participants. The remaining values were decided using the card deck Hergenrader sells for this purpose (figure 5).

After completing the world's outline, the participants began to colour in their work. The metanarrative is the structured and expanded version of the story that began to coalesce in the framework stage. This is where the participants, on their own but with discussion and clarification via four meetings on Zoom and discussions in a discord group, created the locations, people, events, and objects that populate the world they created. This is done using first by populating Hergenrader's (2018) categories of Historical Events, Governance, Economics, Social Relations, and Cultural Influences, then creating a catalogue of the important people, place, and things of this world. Participants were given freedom to take their design in whatever direction they wanted, but with the reminder that the project is part of the dissertation of a PhD in Education and so there would be a focus on high school education and autistics. This was not seen by the participants to be a limit and the foundation meeting led to an initial metanarrative that included the role of education, schools, teachers, and the education system in a world where the autistic population was forced to resist the oppression of fearful non-autistics.

At the conclusion of the original worldbuilding protocol the participants had written 12,985 words and had developed the history behind the autistic rebellion, the formation of the autistic nation of Autopia (none of the participants were strongly in favour of this name but used it as a place holder), and the political, legal, economic, and social nature of this nation. At the meeting where I intended to wrap-up the project, three of the participants asked if they could add fictional narratives to the word, in the style of the novel (not the movie!) World War Z (Brooks, 2006). This novel is written as a series of oral interviews after the zombie war that tell the story of this fictional conflict. This added another 7,851 words to the materials created, a total of 65 single

spaced pages of material (Appendix II). The following text is excerpted from their writing, with minimal editing for clarity.

Results

History

During the events of the Ukraine-Russia Crisis, after learning about Elon Musk purposefully trying to limit telecommunications with Ukraine to support his Russian interests, dark web hackers decided to stick it to him and double down on their independent assistance with the Ukrainian forces. Emboldened by this, the disorganised movement of hacktivists grew in population and started setting their sights on North Korea since it historically had been influenced by Russian interests.

With two countries destabilised thanks to untraceable “Anonymous”-like forces, some superpowers got a bit nervous. Of those found, an odd pattern was discovered; correlation between their dedication, aptitude and those that were diagnosed with some kind of neuro-divergence. Since the movements were disorganised messes led by maybe a few somewhat charismatic members, Governments believed that there could be a way to contain/control the powers that destroyed multiple regimes through social media subterfuge.

Under the guise of wanting to provide better social assistance programs to the people, the US, Canada and many other governments started to provide neurodivergence testing for free at early ages to identify possible future radicals.

One of the few common places where autistics gathered for socialising came in the form of board game cafes and the like. From there, rehashing similar experiences and finding a disturbing pattern forming, protest and resistance started to form.

Governance

In the fictional society of Autopia, a democratic government has been established, uniquely designed to promote equity diversity and inclusion. Autopia's democratic system is based on principles of inclusivity, accommodation, and diversity, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. It consists of legislative, executive, and judicial branches.

The legislative branch of the Autopian government, the Quality of Life Assembly, operates on the principles of inclusivity, diversity, and representation. Elected by ranked-choice ballet, the assembly includes individuals from various backgrounds, such as autistic, neurotypical, white, black, LGBTQ, and Indigenous. By including representatives from marginalised and underrepresented communities, the assembly actively works towards addressing historical injustices and promoting equity.

The executive branch is led by the elected Advocate, who is entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of laws, managing public affairs, and representing the Autopian community both domestically and internationally. To ensure transparency and inclusivity, the executive branch is supported by a council of diverse individuals known as the Advocate Cabinet. This cabinet consists of representatives from various backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of the Autopian population.

The judicial branch is responsible for the fair interpretation and application of laws. It is designed to uphold the principles of justice, protect individual rights, and provide a forum for the resolution of disputes and the administration of justice. In Autopia's judicial system, there is a commitment to promoting alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, such as mediation and arbitration. These methods provide parties with the opportunity to resolve their disputes outside

of the traditional courtroom setting, fostering amicable resolutions and reducing the burden on the court system.

Economics

Pay in Autopia is denoted by a base level pay of all occupations, with a pay increase based on experience. This means that all occupations (agricultural, government, labour, etc.) start on a livable wage, with an increase based on how many years total an individual has been working in that field. In addition to jobs being fair pay across the board, the way in which a career is chosen by the individual happens through job shadowing to help mitigate the amount of job transfers and thus increase the amount of pay an individual can get. Job shadowing follows all general career paths (government, agriculture, labour etc.) and may begin when an individual is 16 years old, with the option for parents or guardians to allow a minor to start job shadowing as young as 14. If an individual does not decide what they would like to pursue before post secondary education is set to begin for them, they will be assigned to a job that they have the requirements for, and needs the most workers. A large section of undecided individuals will be placed in the agricultural section and working with E-Waste trade.

Social Relations

In Autopia, the social fabric is intricately woven with a deep understanding and appreciation of neurodiversity. The society recognizes and celebrates the unique strengths and perspectives of its autistic population, fostering an environment of inclusivity, empathy, and mutual support. There is a collective commitment to creating an accessible and accommodating society that meets the needs of all its citizens.

Communication in Autopia is diverse and multifaceted. Autistic individuals are encouraged to express themselves in ways that feel comfortable and natural to them. This

includes a variety of communication styles, such as verbal, written, sign language, and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) methods. Autopians are skilled listeners, practising active listening and demonstrating patience and understanding during conversations.

Social gatherings and events in Autopia are designed with the sensory sensitivities of autistic individuals in mind. Noise levels, lighting, and other environmental factors are carefully considered to create comfortable and inclusive spaces. Autopians understand and respect personal boundaries, recognizing the importance of allowing individuals to manage their sensory experiences.

Cultural Influences

Both Western and Indigenous knowledge are respected - maintaining their strong creative traditions in Orality and literature while embracing their new works in film and TV productions on streaming services and platforms. Protecting Mother Earth and the Sky Woman is of uttermost importance in ensuring the teachings are protected by the seven generations ahead of us. Both Indigenous Spirituality and non-religious stances are celebrated compared to a couple of years ago when Christianity was the dominant religion in our world.

The use of Indigenous medicines like sage, cedar, sweetgrass is highly empathised for the curing of physical and mental diseases and spending time in the tipi in Indigenous people while non-Indigenous people are encouraged to seek out social prescribing by encouraging them to be in immersed in the other cultures, go to social fires, and experience the natural environment around them.

Chapter 9 Data Analysis and Discussion

In the following sections I will examine the data recorded by five cultural probes (autobiography, Remember When, Night Sky postcards, Inspirational postcards, and Camera Prompts), the Shared Reading meeting transcripts, and the World Building speculative fiction written text.

Cultural Probe Data Analysis

Biography

While reading the biographies I found that there were similar themes across them: one was that the participants were focused on overachieving or had been overachievers and now found themselves constantly underachieving. Another common theme was hyper-empathy and a focus and concern on the needs of others.

Over/under-achieving

Evan describes himself as at an "elite level" in three sports, which some researchers consider a dysfunctional attitude towards perfection (for example, see Greenaway & Howlin, 2010) while others attribute to autistic strengths such as hyperfocus (for example, see Dupuis et al., 2022). This perfectionism extends to his academic work as well. For an assignment where he was expected to do a small portion of a qualitative study, he instead did a full qualitative study, explaining that "This is my bar. My professional standard is, everything I write for class, if I can write it to get published, I'm writing it to get published. So that's what I did." (Evan Meeting 3). This attitude created conflicts with members of his department. In one case, "there was an incident earlier this year with a professor who was bullying me who I put into her fucking place, let's say the least of it. Full tenure professor who tried to get me expelled from the program got told the fuck off, [laughs] because I was right and she's wrong. [laughs]." (Evan Meeting 2). It is

also of note that Evan mentioned the rank of the professor he was in conflict with ("full tenure professor") which elevates the importances or significance of his victory. The interactions with this professor also tie into the other theme of hyper-empathy, below.

Gill described herself as "one of those 'gifted kids' right through until the end of grade school", which is a common occurrence with autistic students known informally as the "gifted child to burned out adult pipeline" (see, for example, Key-Lavishness7867, 2024). Having built her sense of self worth on her ability to easily deal with academic challenges, once she reached a place where things stopped coming easily, she was unprepared to deal with difficulty. As she wrote, she "never really learned how to fail and get back up." Because her ability to be successful without putting in the amount of effort her peers did, she had built her identity around her academic skills, and when this was challenged by the rejection of her collage application, she was unable to recover because of a lack of coping strategies (see, for example, Lin et al., 2022).

Jason falls somewhere in the middle of those two, as he did successfully enter post-secondary education, but is not yet at the graduate level as Evan is (his plans include law school). He is active at his school, competes in the annual Collegiate Leadership Competition, and thrives under pressure and high expectations (see, for example, Smith et al., 2025). His interest in leadership and intention to move on to law school indicate he is driven to succeed. Because of the speed at which he communicates in speaking spaces (using alternative communication systems is consistently slower than mouth-speech) his partners must be willing to progress at his pace. That he never mentions difficulties in this area seems to indicate that people are willing to give him the time he needs to respond and participate in conversations.

Hyper-empathy

Evan's biography goes into detail on his desire to improve the world for everyone, but especially other autistic people, which he describes as his "life goal". One of his two desired vehicles for this is education – despite the difficulties he experienced throughout his journey through the education system he believes that the best way for him to make changes is to gain the rhetorical power a doctorate provides so he can argue as an expert and shape perceptions. The other is through starting his own business to help autistics "unlock their full potential". In his fight with a bullying professor, he said "I'm going to go toe to toe with whoever I need to get justice for myself. And like, I also don't like it when injustices are being done to other people. Because I know how that affects them. So, I tried to advocate for my peers." (Evan Meeting 2). Despite his attempts to get his peers to file a complaint with the school, only he stood up to the bully.

Gill is conflicted in that she is glad there are other people like her in the world but is aware that they likely experienced the same "deep sadness" she has. This "bittersweet" feeling of solidarity and despair is the result of her joy of not being alone tempered with her empathy for others who must also have felt the way she herself has. Research has found that a high proportion of autistic people experience hyper-empathy (see, for example, Kimber et al., 2024) which can be overwhelming. In Gill's case she shares the pain other autistics have experienced.

Jason hopes to work, in a legal capacity, for the federal government or an Indigenous not-for-profit organization, both categories that include serving, protecting, or supporting other people. While Evan's career plans involve uplifting autistic people, Jason is a member of more than one identity group and wrote specifically about supporting Indigenous people, which does

not preclude him from also working with/for autistic people. His volunteer work while a student includes two equity positions that may include either or both Indigenous and autistic issues.

Remember When

In reviewing the Remember When submission I found the two themes of hyper-empathy and over/under-achieving were again present. This activity looked at relationships between the participants and one or more other people – helping, asking for help, or going alone. The connection between empathy and helping others is obvious, but the presence of the theme of over or under-achieving was unexpected.

Hyper-empathy

Three participants, Evan, Jason, and Karen included their volunteer activities in their responses to the Remember When activity question on helping others. Evan led his university's varsity cross country program. Jason discussed helping at two transition events – as a high school student he helped younger students with the transition into high school, and at university he helped incoming students with their transition. This focus on assisting people transition could be a form of Dokumaci's (2023) sharing of repertoires, even if the individuals are not disabled. Karen was involved in musical theater and helped with the transport, building, and takedown of set pieces.

Evan mentioned in his answer that he does not want to be a burden to other people by asking for their help. He preferred to find his own affordances despite the shrinkage (Dokumacı, 2023) he experienced. Karen does not explain why she did not ask for help moving her sales items from her dorm room to the vending area, but either she had no one to ask, or she did not want to ask. A fear of being a burden to others when asking for help has been noted as a common experience of disabled people and has been tied to feeling of self-stigma (see, for example,

Wolfner et al., 2023). Wolfner suggested “students with disabilities did not reach out for help due to fears of being judged negatively or burdensome to others are examples of internalized or self-stigma” (p. 80).

Over/under-achieving

In response to the question on asking for help even if it was not needed, Evan explained that he was judged and criticized for the way he “chose to complete tasks”. The affordances he created were judged by others and their disapproval resulted in a lack of confidence in approaching tasks. To avoid these judgements he would ask for help to do things the proper way, even when he was otherwise capable on his own. This might also explain his reluctance now, as an adult, to ask for help when he does need it. He does tie his enjoyment of taking on, and being challenged by, tasks to his previous lack of confidence. Gill also alludes to a lack of confidence, specifically in confronting her mother.

Night Sky Postcards

The Nigh Sky postcard activity was intended to examine what advice the participants would most like to have had as high school students. Here, again, empathy was a common theme, with the advice being tied to future emotional harms or difficulties.

Hyper-empathy

The key themes in Evan’s postcard to his younger self appears to be his temper. He writes “fuck hockey” because it (a sport he no longer plays but did at the age of the post card recipient) is not as good as running or Muay Thai (sports he participates in now). In the interviews he described being misunderstood by his hockey coaches and teammates “because I was so like, just shut down and nervous and didn’t like know how to engage properly. And like I was almost just like ignore, ignore, ignore. Because it is just too much. I’m bombarded.” (Evan Meeting 1). His

inability to engage in the 'proper' way is a common occurrence for autistic people. Social rules, and especially the social rules of a sport team, are unwritten and this is a well known stumbling block (see, for example, Sutherland et al., 2025). He also compared himself to the Mavel mutant hero Cyclops who shoots powerful, destructive beams from his eyes and cannot control them without the aid of rose quartz goggles. He tells his younger self to use his goggles, presumably to warn him to control his explosive outbursts. In our fifth meeting he felt a connection with Xandri when "she talked about her anger and like how when she was young it burnt hot but now that she's older it burns like cool and like it gives her the focus and determination and all that shit she needs to succeed." He went on to say, "I tell people I'm angry and they're like, 'Oh, like, what do you mean your angry all the time?' And I'm like, you know, I'm rightfully angry, doesn't mean I'm not happy too, [laughs] I'm happy plenty of times. But like, I'm angry as well". That sentiment combined with the suggestion to use the goggles indicates that he does not see anger as an issue, but that unfocused anger is. In a later interview (interview six) he again related to Xandri's ability to focus her anger, "She talked about this, like, coldness she was like, able to summon, and feel. And like—right? Like, I feel like that is what self-regulation has allowed me to do. Is—it has allowed me to take this raw fucking anger that used to just—like, I knew this anger was powerful. Like, I—you know? And like—like, it protected me. It's the reason I'm fucking alive." Researchers have found a connection between of physical activity and improved emotional regulation (see, for example, Tse et al., 2024) and Evan spoke about his use of sports (first hockey, now Muay Thai) for that purpose.

Gill's postcards imply that she experienced difficulties as a youth because she is asexual and aromantic, and felt the need to force herself to feel emotions that others were expressing. She also wrote that her parents were dismissive of her concerns and did not get help for her. She also

was distrustful of doctors, fearing they would share her secrets and get her in trouble. She expresses over the three postcards feelings of being unloved/unable to love, frustration (a request to swear more), and shame.

Inspirational Postcards

Based on the advice they gave their younger selves the empathic nature of the advice for a stranger is not surprising. The postcards are supportive, protective, and present a future for the reader where they will move past the difficulties of the present.

Hyper-empathy

Unlike the first post card assignment, here the participants were asked to write to a fictious, autistic, current high school student. Evan's messages indicated that what he believed a student most need to know was that that things would improve with time. He also included messages of support ("you have so much to offer") and to try and push through ("keep your chin up").

Gill's postcards had a similar theme. She began by telling the student they "are right to be angry and scared and sad" and that their emotions belong to them, not to be controlled by others. Her mention of anger here ties into something she said in our interview where she talked about how often anger can be the result of perceived injustice, noting that "anger does help with focus, especially when things are being unfair. Which, yeah, like we've mentioned before, a big thing with the autistic folks is that we very much value justice" (Gill Meeting 5). She ended that interview with a quotation, "There are three things all wise men fear: the sea in a storm, a night with no moon and the anger of a gentle man." In her second postcard she expressed the idea that people exist in the world who are with the "effort and heartache" it takes to form relationships, include online relationships. She ends with a caution to "be careful", which may mean (based on

that sentence following the one about internet relationships) to be warry of people you meet online and form relationships with.

Camera Prompts

Something you need help doing

The responses to this prompt are interesting because, while there are only two of them, they demonstrate how autism is a disability even for people who might otherwise be considered "low support need". Evan finds what many people consider basic hygiene – flossing his teeth – to be difficult. For autistic children, adolescents, and adults, however, dental hygiene can be very stressful (see, for example, McMillion et al., 2021). Similarly, Gill finds the process of applying for jobs (not necessarily the act of working, but of looking for and applying to jobs) a "real struggle". Despite government support for her disabilities, she is still tasked with finding places to apply and find the whole process frustrating and demotivating. She questions if this is autism related, but studies (see, for example, Smethurst et al., 2025) do show that this struggle is common for autistic people.

Something you do with someone else even though you don't need to

Gill makes two interesting points about autistic needs. She mentions her difficulty knowing when she needs help, likely due to alexithymia which is common in autistic people (see, for example, Ferguson et al., 2023). She also describes working on a video call with other people to help her work. While this has come into greater relief since Covid, the use of body doubling as a technique has been employed by neurodivergent people for far longer (see, for example, Eagle et al., 2024). Related to parallel play, where children play by themselves in the presence of other children or adults, working around other people as they do their own tasks (live or online) has been suggested in popular media as a way to improve productivity for neurodivergent people, though the academic research on the topic is limited (Eagle et al., 2023, 2024).

Something you do the same way today as when you were younger & Something you do differently now from when you were younger

In response to these two prompts Gill explained that as a child she had to hide her vegetables in her mashed potatoes because she did not like the texture. While food sensitivities, especially texture, are common with autistic people (Collis, 2025a), her needs were not met as a child and she had to find her own affordances to be able to eat her meals. This resulted in her being more active once she had control of her meal planning and preparation. She was able to experiment without judgement and developed a better sense of her own preferences.

Something that makes you feel independent & Something that makes you feel dependent

Gill's responses to these two prompts are connected and relate to something Evan wrote in the Remember When task: that because he was constantly corrected as a child, he lacks confidence in his ability to do things without asking for help out of fear of doing it wrong. Gill wrote that Being away from home was one of the best experiences she's had and the only time she felt like an adult. In part was the freedom to make her own decisions, but also that she did not feel judged for her choices. She also could do things in ways that made sense for her, even if the approach was "a little weirder than normal". Now that she is back to living with her mother, she only gets to experience this when her mom is away and she can "talk to myself or my cat, dance in the kitchen, make mistakes and nobody's around to criticize." When her mother is around, criticizes her methods, and takes over the task, she feels disempowered and is left "standing there off to the side like a freaking lemon" and unable to learn the 'proper' way she should have done it. This has led to her having difficulties with failure and perfectionism and freezing when she makes a mistake.

Gill's Reflective Journal

Gill was the only participant to journal their thoughts as they read the novel. Following our first meeting, where we discussed the initial ~50 pages, Gill was worried that she had been focused too much on the "negative experiences" of her autism. She raises a salient point, however, "living with it is a struggle and that's what the study is supposed to be helping alleviate" and so discussing the difficulties is part of creating affordances to alleviate or avoid them. She also mentions the added complexity of autism plus depression, anxiety, and ADHD which "all kind of feed into each other in a vicious cycle".

In her next entry, Gill notes that her ADHD medication does not seem to be working because she "put off doing the reading and work till the last possible second". She was also distracted that week due to a communication breakdown with one of her autistic friends, noting that it is "Bad enough when neurotypicals can't understand me but when communications breakdown with my autistic friends it really makes you feel alone." While research on inter-autistic communication has shown it to be highly effective (Crompton et al., 2020, 2025) and "misinterpretations … were not always problematic precisely because participants demonstrated a low coordination threshold and were able to move on quickly from disconnected and disruptive turns" (Heasman & Gillespie, 2019b, p. 916) no interpersonal relationships are perfect. Because of the difficulty and effort autistic people need to put into mix-neurotype relationships (Williams et al., 2021), disruption of a relationship with an autistic friend is especially impactful.

In her first entry Gill expressed curiosity about the other participants. The group activities did not begin until after the shared reading, so there are no entries after she was introduced to the others. Of the four she was the only one not a student at the university. Her questions, "Are they younger than me? Can my experiences an advice help?" indicate that she was unsure if she

would be cast as an autistic elder, and worried that she would not be up to the task. As she pointed out, “I don't feel that much like an adult, just a kid that seen some shit most days.” When asked by one of the cultural probes to provide that kind of advice (inspirational postcard activity) she struggled, writing “Coming up with a message for younger person in my situation wasn't easy either. I don't know what advice I could give that would actually help without being a cop out. ‘Things get better eventually’ just says they won't be good for a while and ‘stand up for yourself’ is just begging to be knocked down.”

In her entry for week 3, Gill wrote about the other postcard activity, writing to her younger self. She noted that was starting to see a pattern where the probe activities were making her “frustrated and depressed”, but she was particularly “dreading this assignment from the get-go.” Regrets and imagining alternate actions in the past are common parts of the autistic experience (see, for example, Gray, 2025). Gill confirms that she experiences this, writing “I have a lot of regrets in my life. I'm willing to admit I spent too much time thinking about how I could change things if I went back with my current knowledge.” She continued, questing how much of what she experienced would change based on changes to her actions, and how much was beyond her own control. While she does think about the past, she has also accepted that no amount of wishing to change things will affect her life, and so the postcards “to my past self don't bring a catharsis like intended.”

In her week 4 entry Gill describes a conversation with her sister-in-law, a teacher. Gill seems to be discomforted by the blasé response, and how the sister-in-law dismissed the value of any research because “there will never be the funding to put the findings into use.” The exact nature of the distribution of the research results had not been decided or discussed at this point, but the intention was to find and share affordances, so cost was not necessarily the limiting

factor. Gill was discouraged that her participation might not accomplish change but continued to "hope that school can/will be better than what I went through as a kid." She knows that autism is better understood and recognised now but is not sure if things are better for students. She blames the misinformation and stigma on "the anti-vax jackasses on that one. And Autism Speaks." Autism Speaks is widely reviled by autistic people and even referred to in some spaces as a hate group (Kizer, 2024). Much of this comes from their highly stigmatizing and fearmongering television commercial I Am Autism (*I Am Autism Commercial by Autism Speaks*, n.d.).

In her final entry Gill writes that when she agreed to participate in the study, she "didn't think it would be as emotionally exhausting as it was." The activities and discussions brought up "some not great memories" and activities that involved fictional characters were also emotionally difficult. She did feel a sense of validation when I confirmed that some of her experiences were unreasonable.

In her entries on the shared reading, Gill noted in week 4 that she had read the last chapter and was not surprised that the ending is not a happy one. Her impression of the novel was that the author was "walling in the struggles Xandri has and pandering for relatability" and she was neither enjoying nor disliking the book so far: "It's just there".

In the following entry she again notes that the author is not particularly subtle in their writing and that they "didn't pull any punches this section". The author's depiction of eugenics as normal and mandatory drew a strong reaction from her, as expected. I have written before about the connections between autistic people, concern over eugenics, and science fiction (Collis, 2022). Her reaction to the general telling Xandri to sit still ("he told her Quiet Hands like a fucking teacher") makes it clear she too has been the subject of such treatment. Her response,

“the author is totally projecting here and just cuz I relate doesn't mean I can't call out ham fisted writing when I see it” seems to confirm this, as well as her negative perception of the lack of subtlety she has commented on previously. In her refence to “isekai” (Japanese anime/manga where the ordinary main character is transported to a different world, usually fantasy or science fiction based) she is suggesting the author, a victim of being told to quiet her hands, wrote this book to put herself in (“projecting”) to relive this experience and perhaps change the outcome. That would not be dissimilar to some of the activities Gill undertook in this study, such as the postcard to her younger self. In those isekai stories the transported character often has some advantages over the native people of the world they are sent to, which she describes as “get superpowers and beat up the bullies”. The problem with the world the author created is that in this one, Gill writes, “EUGENICS WON! Fucking Hell.”

Discussion

The results from the cultural probes were not as helpful as I had hoped. I attribute this to three problems: Firstly, not all participants completed their tasks or did not respond when the images they sent of their tasks were too small to be legible. Secondly, because I did not start to analyse the data from the probes until after the collaborative world building was well underway, I did not have the opportunity to meet with the participants and ask for clarification or more details. By the time I realized that I should arrange future meetings the participants had stopped responding to emails. Häkkinen et al. (2025), discussing cultural probes, note that “The outcome of the qualitative data gathering is never completely in the hands of the researcher, and this applies maybe even more when using experimental methods.” (p. 108). Finally, while this method has great potential in the hands of someone who can ‘read between the lines’ and make inferences from the submitted materials, I lack the creativity to go beyond surface levels of

understanding in such a manner. As Häkkinen et al. (2025) note, “Adopting playfulness is also more intrinsic for some individuals than it is for others. Thus, playful methods may not work for everybody” (p. 107). While the more explicit materials provided a bounty of information about the participants, I had trouble extracting meaning from the more subtle probes.

Shared Reading Data Analysis

All participants found the autistic character to be very relatable, and her struggles mirrored their own experiences. One participant, who usually doesn’t like reading fiction, noted “But like this book I found I’ve enjoyed it a little bit more because I find myself identifying with some things the character says about how they feel in certain situations.” Another participant found the main character, Xandri’s, mental struggles “very reliable [sic]. I yell and scream and get a bad reaction from my brain and chest and tic a lot.”

Following Chapple, Davis, et al. (2021), I use the novel as “common ground” that provides “a shared social setting to operate within during discussion sessions: hence discussion was not just ‘about’ but ‘around’ and ‘within’ the book” (p. 7). Thus, I was able to draw on the participants’ experiences with the education system through discussion that targeted the ways participants did or did not relate to the text. One participant, reflecting on how his learning changed after leaving high school, noted “I love math now and that was a late in life kind of discovery because the education system kind of let me down.” He elaborated that he “didn’t find out I was a fucking math savant until I was twenty-seven. In fact, your education system suppressed that in me, because it didn’t allow me to function how I needed to function to be focused on my work, my schoolwork. How can I—how can you expect me to learn about math when I’m like, fucking, just trying not to let everyone find out I’m kind of gay, you know?”

Another participant agreed that the post-secondary system was a better fit for them: “I have experienced social struggles and have to advocate for my own accommodation and have thrive [sic] in a campus setting compared to the K-12 setting.” They found that the K-12 system prevented them from accepting and appreciating their differences: “In elementary and high school I had thoughts where I wished I was like a neurotypical person” in part because “I often hit myself and self harmed and was a perfectionist in high school.”

One theme that came up was that the participants felt that teachers were not prepared to work with autistic students. One participant stated that her grade four teacher “was like, ‘Why are you doing—why are you different? Why is this not working?’ And I think it was less malicious of, like, ‘Well, I just don’t want to teach you because you’re being difficult,’ and more of like, ‘I don’t understand how to teach you.’” Another said “Everyone, teachers hated me. It was like the number one complaint. Like, how do we get [name] to stay in his desk, right? And it’s like, well, how about you just meet [name] in the middle, you know? [laughs].” A third participant compared learning at home online versus the strict rules of the classroom: “I have much freedom in my bedroom than the teachers telling me what to do—I tend to move around my bed stimming and my legs and very relaxing.”

As intended, the participants “used the raw materials of the text to facilitate autobiographical recollection” (Longden et al., 2015, p. 5). The participants made repeated calls for greater understanding by teachers of their needs as autistic students. This is in line with the literature which found that teachers feel unprepared to teach autistic students (Kisbu-Sakarya & Doenyas, 2021; Van Reusen et al., 2001) and indicates a need for better training in pre-service teacher education. As one participant noted, “You're going to have difficulties twisting in a screw

when you're trying to beat it with a fucking hammer. Instead, you just got to pull out the screwdriver and then that screw's not going to be so fucking difficult anymore."

Discussion

The shared reading component of the project was the most rewarding both personally and in terms of data collection. The novel, as hoped for, provided multiple opportunities to engage with the participants and gain insight into their lives. Comments on the novel ranged from positive to non-committal, and while the author's writing was described as "ham fisted" by one participant, there were no complaints on the protagonists' portrayal as an autistic person.

The conversations over the novel were personally rewarding as we connected over shared experiences. They were also a reminder of why this work is important, as these experiences were more recent than my own time in high school, but not that different. There is an echo of Gill's sister-in-law's comment that nothing ever changes inherent to that thought.

The demands of autistic students to adopt normalized behaviour in classrooms was a common experience. While my ability to remain in my chair and mostly still and quiet is outside of the norm in one direction, most autistic people need to move their bodies to self-regulate and all the participants had experienced pushback. Jason's described physical tics in class that required him to leave and Gill's response to quiet hands in the novel indicated she had been the recipient of such demands. While improved teacher training might alleviate this demand for classroom conformity, that would at best be a solution only for those teachers educated in the future. The teachers already in a classroom are unlikely to be encouraged to reconceptualize their practice because of a new professional advisory. In that respect, Gill's sister-in-law is correct. I disagree with her argument that it is money that holds back improvements in this case: most of the issues are not financial, but behavioural. Resocializing teachers to accept different ways of

being in the classroom – listening without looking in the "right" direction, fidgeting, walking around the room – do not require changes to the physical classroom. There are built environment changes that would help, of course. Sounds echoing, smells, other sensory issues all might require physical changes to the building which would require capital and will, both of which are in short supply.

The adoption of personal items to mitigate some of the sensory issues has been unevenly accepted. Ear defenders to lower ambient sound can sometimes be seen in schools, but fidget toys were coopted by the general population and subsequently forbidden. Teachers allowing students to listen to music depends on the individual, as the devices have changed from having only one function (music) to multi-function smartphones that have been banned in classrooms in Ontario.

World Building Data Analysis

Novum

In the time since the participants created their world some aspects of autistic life, specifically in the United States, have moved in the direction of the novum. When they created the inciting incident of their cooperative world they asked, "what would happen if, due to their involvement in political actions, the government classified autistic people as a threat to national security?" Since then, the US government has taken two actions that moved reality closer to fiction. The US president has declared that the loose collection of anti-fascist activists under the umbrella term "Antifa" are a domestic terrorist group (Trump, 2025), with Hungary and European right and nationalist parties following his example (Rankin, 2025). In the same time span, and also involving the US president, the US Department of Health and Human Services has been heavily focused on the autism epidemic (US Department of Health and Human Services,

2025), going so far as to violate the laws of science and claim autism is caused by vaccines since it has not been proved to NOT cause autism (Center for Disease Control, 2025). This is based on the 'scientific evidence' that "approximately one in two surveyed parents of autistic children believe vaccines played a role in their child's autism" (Center for Disease Control, 2025). HHS also considered, but backed off on, creating a registry of autistic citizens (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2025).

When the participants came up with their novum, the idea that autistic people would be seen by the government as a potential threat for engaging in anti-fascist and anti-nationalist behavior leading to a registry, none of the above had happened yet. While the fictional autistic people caused the downfall of Russia and North Korea, their real-life doubles did far less to end up on a similar path. For a decade Israel has had a specialised autistic military unit (Rubin, 2016), but the novum's conceit of autistic individuals tracked and forced into military service is still fiction, for now. However, the decision to make the starting point of their world's history a dark time for autistic people just before it happened indicates that they were very preceptive of the direction the world was moving in. The dark tone of a world beginning just before an armed autistic rebellion and fight for independence and freedom seems slightly less impossible today.

Future Historiography

The participants chose Wolf-Meyer's (2019) "intensification" as the form of future historiography used. The background of their story has the war in Ukraine draw in autistic hackers, leading to governmental fears of the autistic populace in their countries. This intensification of ableism, anti-autistic fears, and stereotyping of autistics as math/computer savants leads to forced testing, surveillance, and mandatory government service which ultimately leads to rebellion and the formation of a nation for autistic people and their allies.

Rimke (2010) wrote about the way social policing is used to identify dangerous threats to the "moral and economic health of the social body" to "create, incite, and instill moral panics over the invisibility of monsters — the unnatural, the immoral, the evil — amongst us" to deflect "attention from the powerful to the marginalized as the social source of human pain and suffering" (p. 5). The history of the participants' world reflects that, creating an autistic moral panic over the invisible threat hidden among the populace. There "the precondition for inclusion … in mainstream society requires their assimilation (via special education, rehabilitation, and assistive technology) or their complete annihilation (euthanasia, abortion of disabled fetuses)" (Erevelles, 2011, p. 33).

History

The history written by the participants serves as the future from the real and now and as the past of the point at which their story is told. World events had a large influence on their choices: the recently started Russian invasion of Ukraine was foundational to the strife between autistics and others in their world. Hergenrader (2018) wrote that a depiction of a world is an interpretation of its location in time and space, and the participants mixed several real world concepts together to create their history: The aggressiveness of Russia and North Korea resisted by noble (autistic) hackers; The connection between (many) autistic people, board and card games, and game stores/cafes as the key to meeting and communicating inconspicuously. While the story is very black and white, with little subtlety or nuance, autistics are often believed to think in such stark terms (Suzuki & Hirai, 2023). In their story the government's surveillance of autistic people, supposedly to improve support, is designed to determine who is a threat and who can be used (and who falls under both categories). In our world registries already exist: there are local ones for police in many cities (see, for example, https://www.drps.ca/online-

services/online-reporting-and-registries/autism-registry/), and the US government was considering creating a national one (Wise, 2025).

The portion of the history where autistic people engage in clandestine operations against the state were fleshed out with details about leaders in the rebellion (such as Charlotte Madison AKA StaticFluffle and Josef Keegan-Wright AKA Yoobiel00), events (such as The Seattle Riot AKA the Black Deck Weekend and The Fall of Cayman Banks), and real world games used to encode messages (such as Minecraft and Magic: The Gathering). It is of importance to note the inclusion of autistic people belonging to even further marginalized groups among these characters, such as Charlotte Madison who is disabled, trans and a furry. Autistic people are proportionally over represented in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community (Strang & Fischbach, 2023) and the participants, some of whom are members themselves, were sure to include representation, and not just representation of themselves. None of the participants are trans or disabled in the way the character is described – they felt it important to include representation of members of groups they themselves do not belong to.

Another character they created is an AI powered vtuber (a YouTube or Twitch video producer represented by a virtual avatar) named Ai-a. At the time a propaganda-sharing artificial being existing to promote a nation's power and innovation was fiction. Today we have a robot that was granted citizenship by a nation to promote its interests: Saudia Arabia granted the Hanson Robotics manufactured robot Sophia citizenship and made it their Innovation Ambassador for the United Nations Development Programme (Hanson Robotics, 2024). Ai-a was, in the fictional world, a Chinese means of self-promotion as well as a tool to steal data. Her defeat at the hands of hackers was a major event in the timeline of the resistance.

Structural Categories

Governance

The elements of the governance categories included a strong but decreasing government presence, a moderately strong but decreasing rule of law, and moderately weak social services. The in-world explanation was that due to the newness of Autopia and the lack of international support meant that while social services were a priority, there was limited financial capacity. The other elements were strong for the same reason: the newly founded nation was directly involved in both setting up governance and laws.

The design of the governance structure, three co-equal branches, appears to be more American than Canadian in design due to the inclusion of an executive branch. However, unlike the US executive branch led by a president, the Advocate and their diverse Council are tasked with "create[ing] a government that is responsive, effective, and accountable to the needs and aspirations of all members of Autopia." The descriptions of the members of the Council, their roles, and the requirements for them to be "representatives from various backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of the Autopian population" embed a level of representational governance that no democracy has truly achieved. In Canada, there was celebration in 2015 when the Prime Minister appointed women to half of the positions in his Cabinet (Murphy, 2015). This is an extension of that to ensure multiple ways of thinking and being are represented.

The legislative branch, tellingly named the Quality of Life Assembly, is elected through ranked voting and is mandated to include diverse representation, like the Cabinet. There is a lack of detail on how such diversity is ensured: quotas, reserved positions, or some other mechanism. Ranked voting is described as "ensuring that elected officials have broad-based support and reflect the diverse views of the population" but ensuring that the ballot contains a diverse set of

candidates is not explained. Regardless, the intent that all members of Autopia are represented in the decision making and implementation bodies shows a clear desire for diversity of thought and experience in leadership. This contrasts with the reality where political dynasties of wealthy white men (Bush, Trudeau, Kenedy) exist.

The judicial branch's "commitment to promoting alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, such as mediation and arbitration" shows an anti-carceral influence where the focus is not on imprisonment and the harms that brings to the individual and society, but on "amicable resolutions and reducing the burden on the court system." This is to be expected as the participants are undoubtedly aware that autistic people have high rates of interaction with the criminal justice system in many countries (see, for example, Cooper et al., 2022).

Economic

The minimal (and stagnant) economic strength, the average wealth distribution, and the slightly above average agricultural production again are products of the way the nation was formed and how young it is: The nation is poor, the poverty is mostly shared across all people, and there is a focus on improving agricultural production to ensure all are fed.

The largest divergence from the real world is the way people pay is determined. All people begin with a liveable wage to prevent the citizens from becoming the working poor (Conde et al., 2023) of our world. While Conde et al. (2023) did not include disability in their analysis, autist people do fall under some of the categories they did use such as being educated and working fewer than full time hours (due to disability). Pay then increases each year the worker remains working in that field, even if they change employers. This rewards people for remaining in one area and becoming more skilled but also allows people to entirely change

careers without risk of becoming destitute. They will lose the extra money from their experience but still be paid enough to live.

The participants also created a detailed approach for deciding on careers, with job shadowing to ensure a good fit starting at 16 (or optionally as young as 14 acknowledging that autistic peoples' experience with formal education systems can differ even from one to another). Those who have no preference are, based on their capabilities, sent to critical infrastructure jobs such as agriculture or recycling E-Waste (a major source of foreign currency for the nation).

Social relations

The initial social relation structure had very poor (but improving) support for 2SLGBTQIA+, poor and unchanging race relations, strong class and gender relations, and excellent (but declining) age and ablism relations. The participants attributed this, in part, to the national focus on neurodiversity and creation as a reaction to anti-autistic actions elsewhere. They also explained that the reason for the low rating in relations with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community was not due to discrimination or disapproval of non-traditional relationships. Rather that this population, comprised of immigrants and refugees from the rebellion, would include many people who had faced "some kind of sexual trauma whether in the form of abuse by caretakers or even non-consensual sterilisation by government healthcare." There might also be social disapproval of people exclusively engaged in traditional relationships because of the high population of 2SLGBTQIA+ people, and those who intended to have children could be seen as intentional bringing people into a world that is now proven to be hostile to them.

The use of alternate modes of communication would be normalized in Autopia, as there would be people from many different countries with different languages as well as non-speaking autistics who also might have additional different language needs. The use of technology,

symbology, and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) would be key to ensuring understanding across these lines.

Also mentioned in this section is an understanding of autistic sensory needs in public and social spaces. The participants consider the role of noise levels, lighting and other environmental stimuli in creating comfortable and inclusive spaces.

Cultural influences

The initial values for cultural influences indicate that military, religion, nature all have average and equal levels of influence while technology and art and culture have somewhat less influence, with technology rising towards the former.

The participants wrote that they expected the use of small, personal technology (such as wearables, phones, and watches) would be on the rise due to the prevalence of streaming media and AI. The increase in technology influence would also be driven by the creation and adoption of home-grown devices and software.

The participants also described (the return of?) internet cafes where drinks and in-person and/or virtual meetings take place as the new third space for neurodiverse people. They tie this back into the creation story with mention of plans being made for peacekeeping and changing the world for the better. It is here that the next evolution of neurodiverse culture will emerge, with social good and technological advances intertwined.

Discussion

The most interesting part of the world building exercise to me was that my participants had so little hope for autistic acceptance, even in the future, that they envisioned an armed rebellion and the formation of a safe homeland for autistics. Slater (2024) writes of capitalist realism that limits utopian imagination and forecloses on the ability to imagine new societies,

and what occurred here may be an example of this. Disbelief that this world can be better, even decades from now, “capitalist realism generates a dystopian *structure of feeling* in culture and politics.” (Slater, 2024, p. 42). Slater explains that structures of feeling are shared but unspoken sensibilities, and here the effect is to push the participants towards the dystopian future they articulate. Also of interest is how governments, medical professionals, and the pathologization of autism are the villains of the story (along with the wealthy and the military industrial complex). While science fiction is not lacking in shadowy government conspiracies or evil scientists and geneticists, in this story those forces seek to convert autistic people to their own capitalistic end and are foiled by the autistic pattern finding skills they sought to harness.

The nation of Autopia connected education and employment much the same way modern capitalist societies do now, though with an emphasis on job shadowing to ensure the correct fit. However, the focus on all employees starting with a livable wage with increases based on time in service is clear resistance to capitalist ideas of whose work is more important. Rewarding long-term employment in a field (and the increase in skills in that field that would accrue) rather than a blanket decision that some educational destinations are more valuable than others acknowledges the reality that disabled people, regardless of education, make less than their non-disabled peers (Parekh et al., 2024). Additionally, the reliance on job shadowing does several things – it allows a student to learn how well the job interacts with their unique autistic traits (sensory sensitivities, ways of thinking, etc.) and it helps those who are not suited to classroom style learning to find success through other modalities. The authors did not directly address higher education, but with job shadowing starting at 16 (or as young as 14) post-secondary education would occur in parallel with employment in the chosen field. Those students who did not know what they wanted to do would be assigned where they could best serve the community,

but since this was not meant to be a punishment there would likely be a way to re-enter schooling and change careers at some future time. The authors were clear they would not want to see an individual's potential be wasted because of historic and arbitrary forms of educational preparation.

The social world of Autopia is crafted specifically to account for and accommodate the needs of a neurodiverse population. The authors included a comment on the normalization of what are presently non-standard communication styles, which speaks to the stigma in our world for those who do not use mouth speech, like Jason. They also mention "patience and understanding in communication", likely because autistics often have language processing difficulties that can make understand speech difficult, especially in noisy environments, and those who use AAC require time to input their responses. They also focus on the wider sensory environment and how that can be hard for autistic to navigate. In the real world the physical environment in a school is outside the students' control. The thermostat is centrally controlled, meaning the temperature and the noise from the heating/cooling unit cannot be changed at will by the teacher. Overhead lights, often the buzzing fluorescent kind, can be either on or off, but not dimmed. The noise of the classroom can be controlled to a point by the teacher, but there is always a background radiation of whispered (or shouted) voices that make focusing on instructions or work difficult. The chairs and desks are mass produced and not designed for specific bodies, and the students are expected to remain seated, and usually still, for extended periods. However, in Autopia, these needs are considered in the designing of public spaces because the society recognizes "the importance of allowing individuals to manage their sensory experiences".

Cultural Influences

The cultural influence section of the text was written by an Indigenous person who envisioned a future where Indigenous knowledge and ways of being are not just acknowledged but integrated into society. Environmental fears are not just about ensuring humanity's survival on a damage Earth, but Autopians are called to protect Mother Earth and the Sky Woman for the generations of the future. Indigenous programing in film and television, and the celebration of Indigenous holidays, are normalized and given the same respect as other minority faiths and cultures. Cultural sharing is encouraged, cultural traditions are appreciated, and the role of the natural world is emphasised for spiritual healing.

Chapter 10 Conclusion

In this doctoral research project, I sought to answer the question how can public, inclusive secondary schooling be improved by better understanding and responding to autistic affordances? I did this through four sub-questions that build on each other:

1. How can community based participatory education research methods be responsive and attuned to autistic ways of being, learning, and world building?
2. What autistic affordances become visible through these methods?
3. What implications do these autistic affordances have for transforming inclusive secondary school structures and practices?
4. What are strengths and limitations of using autistic-informed CBPR methods to study affordances in secondary schooling, and how might this shape future research and practice?

To be responsive to autistic needs I used three novel methods to learn from four autistic adults about their experiences in high school and made visible some of the affordances that the participants used. From the cultural probes we learned that while team sports helped Evan regulate himself, he was forced to move to individual sports because of interpersonal difficulties. We also learn that he uses technological affordances to overcome sensory barriers, for example to help with his dental hygiene his partner gave him a spring armed dental floss holder. In the shared reading activity Gill described one of her affordances, that she would make what she knew were bad choices just to know that she made a choice. In their work on the worldbuilding Gill also alluded to affordances provided by inter-autistic communication – in-jokes, memes, and references.

By identifying these autistic created affordances and listening to their stories, we can learn how to improve inclusive education in public secondary schools. During the discussions the participants expressed dissatisfaction with the secondary school system and how only later, in a less limiting post-secondary environment, did they start to learn more about their educational needs and abilities. Distracted by their differences (autistic and 2SLGBTQIA+ identities) and feeling unsupported in their needs, they found community, academic success, and freedom after leaving the public school system. Disability as method analysis tells us that the problem is not with the learners (as they were able to learn in different contexts) but with the structural assumptions and requirements of the school system that prevent them from being successful. Social, political, and material structures that anticipated a particular type of individual were, despite moves towards inclusive education, not willing to expand to include these students.

In their imagined future, after the armed rebellion and the creation of an autistic nation, the participants provided a possible education system. Students in this future experienced an education system that was career focused, with practice aspects (job shadowing). There was also no social pressure for specific 'high paying' jobs as all jobs began at a set base salary. Raises based on skill existed but there was no mention of limitations where some had higher maximums than others. They include the detail that the age for job shadowing can vary because autistic needs can vary. A central tenant of the nation is inclusion, with explicit mentions of neurodivergent, 2SLGBTQIA+, and non-oral speakers. They collectively designed a world where environmental affordances were provided for all possible beings so that no one would need to create their own activist affordances.

The autistic-informed participatory methods, specifically the shared reading and collaborative worldbuilding, appeared to be well received by the participants. Even those who

were not readers of science fiction found the novel interesting and were avid participants in the conversations that followed, and the contributors to the speculative fiction asked to continue even after the project ended because they were so invested in the story they created. The cultural probes were mostly well received, but not all probes were completed by all participants, despite multiple requests, and so I assume they were not as engaged in that component of the research as in the others. There is strong potential in the shared reading and worldbuilding for future research with autistic participants, and I hope to revisit those methods in the future.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation is the participants. In addition to being a small sample, they were all students who, despite their struggles, were successful in high school and graduated with their diploma. Many other autistic students do not graduate or may be put into pathways that do not lead to graduation. The participants are not representative of all autistic students in high school (though I would argue the autistic experience is too diverse for any sample to be representative).

Another limitation is that the project began in 2020, just after most organizations moved online because of the pandemic. This potentially had a negative effect on recruitment but likely had no effect on participation as the activities were designed for remote engagement. Moving online may have proved a boon to a subset of autistic people.

Practice Recommendations

The shared reading and world building activities can both be directly translated to the classroom. While a teacher having an hour-long conversation, six times, with every student in the class is not feasible, there are ways that students can learn from each other using a shared novel. The world building activity has been used in classrooms (see, for example, Tomin, 2021a) and

can be used with student to learn how they perceive the present through their visions of the future. Both activities can be used by teachers to bring student voices into the classroom to better inform teaching.

Teachers are the arbitrators of the classroom, tasked with keeping things running smoothly and enforcing rules. To better serve autistic (and other neurodivergent) students many of those rules must be reconsidered. For example, a student who is sensory seeking might move their body (flap their hands, stim), doodle, or fidget with an item when they are expected to pay attention. These behaviours may appear to be indicators that the student in not attentive to the lesson but is in fact the opposite: the student would be unable to focus attention on the lesson without the sensory stimulation of these activities. Likewise, autistic students may not look at a speaker when listening because the audio and visual stimulation is too much to handle at once. By not focusing their vision on the speaker they are keeping more of their attention on the spoken words. Teachers must decide if behaviour outside of what they consider the classroom norm is harmful before they assume it needs to be addressed. Is this behavior detrimental to other students or can all student needs be met by allowing it or asking the student to modify it in some way, rather than demanding it be stopped.

Policy Recommendations

Teacher education, that is education for pre-service teachers at faculties of education) is still lags far behind the reality of the classroom. When I earned my teaching licence in 2005 there were no required course on special education. Since then, the duration of the BEd program in Ontario has doubled and schools have between zero and one required (core) course on special

education. For example, Queen's University[6] has none, while Redeemer University[7] has one. While these courses can be taken as electives, teachers do not get to elect to have autistic (or other disabled) students in their classroom and preparing incoming teachers to work with these students is critical. From the stories shared by the participants, secondary school was a time of understanding themselves as multi-dimensional people (as it is for all students) but some have more dimensions and more discovery than others. Presumably if the participants had additional marginalized identities (physical disability or race, for example) the number of plates being spun at once would have increased further. However, education policy is, to an extent, concerned with improving scores on standardized tests[8] far more than on giving students time and space to understand themselves and the world they inhabit. The responsibility (and possibly blame) falls to classroom teachers who need to balance teaching their entire class the semester's curriculum while simultaneously providing each student with individualized attention. Where practical limits (number of hours in a day, number of students in a class) intersect with needs is one place where students may need to create affordances. While UDL works to reduce the number of needs unmet from a task, there will always be those who require some additional support.

Schools are rule based ecosystems. While autistic people in general are found of structured, regulated systems with predictable transitions, they also are known for demanding logical reasons for rules they are expected to follow. Neurodivergent students often have needs that come into conflict with these rules. A need to pace or fidget while listening violates classroom rules and appears as disinterest. Not looking into a speech partner's eyes while talking, or looking around while listening violates social norms, but is often necessary to reduce

[6] https://www.queensu.ca/academic-calendar/education/consecutive-education-program/degree-requirements/
[7] https://www.redeemer.ca/wp-content/uploads/education-degree-map-2025_26.pdf
[8] https://globalnews.ca/news/11557546/ford-government-eqao-results-review/

stimulation so that the person can concentrate on listening. While revising social norms is beyond the scope of this project, classroom management that still relies on the "stop, look, listen" model is entirely in opposition to what autistic students may need in the classroom. They cannot stop (pacing, flapping, stimming), look (at the speaker or in their eyes), or listen (they are listening, but they often do not appear to, looking off to the side or around the room, or doodling in their notebook) in the typical way. School rules need to understand this. Taking sensory breaks outside of the classroom or pacing during a lesson needs to be normalized to reduce stigma and to be more welcoming to those who need such things. This again goes back, at least in part, to pre-service teachers' education. The results of this research seem to indicate that an understanding of the other-than-typical ways autistic students engage in learning (movement, fidgeting, etc.) as well as strategies to destigmatize those behaviours are needed. Having autistic people present lessons to preservice teachers is one way to accomplish this. I have done several of these myself.

Finaly, while the Canadian and Ontario governments cannot do much about the anti-autistic rhetoric across the boarder, more can be done here. The federal government has rolled out a framework for a National Autism Strategy[9,10], and provided money to two non-autistic led organizations[11] to create a network. The network's leadership have titles like "Interim Chief Executive Officer" and "Project Operations Manager" but are not autistic[12]. The autistic members titles are "Accessibility Advisor", "Knowledge Broker", and "Senior Research & Policy Analyst". The last one, at least, seems to have some level of corporate importance. The

[9] https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/canada-autism-strategy.html
[10] https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/news/2023/07/government-of-canada-supports-the-establishment-of-a-national-autism-network0.html
[11] https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/news/2025/03/government-of-canada-announces-the-organization-to-establish-and-lead-the-national-autism-network.html
[12] https://nan-rna.ca/about-us/

board of directors is mostly autistic, but that the National Autism Network is unable to find autistic senior leadership is problematic. Additionally, the leadership of "Strategic Priority Committee 1: Screening, diagnosis and services" are all non-autistic people in medical or medical adjacent fields (speech-language pathologist, physiotherapist, epidemiologist, psychologist, etc.). This implies that the services focused on will more heavily favour medical interventions than, for example, housing support.

More support for families, schools, teachers, and of course the students themselves are needed. The research in this dissertation shows that it is possible to learn directly from autistic people what they need, and most of that is not medical intervention but social support. It is unclear from their stated aims if and how this National Strategy will be led by the autistic members and learn from autistic people at large. The methods presented here could provide some options.

Organizations with autistic membership (but not necessarily leadership) continue to hold the bulk of power over autistic voices. For example, the Autism Alliance of Canada, on the creation of the Autism Strategy Act in the province of Manitoba wrote

> Autism Alliance of Canada is honoured to have provided insights to MLA Lamoureux, the champion of this legislation, to make it a reality. Bill 232 provides guidelines for the development of a **provincial Autism Strategy Act, including specific measures aligned with Canada's Autism Strategy.** The Act even refers to the Alliance by name, requiring consultations with "organizations that advocate on behalf of Autistic persons and their families and caregivers, such as the Autism Alliance of Canada".

> This serves as a powerful testament to the importance of evidence-based research and our collective advocacy in building a more supportive, inclusive Canada for the autism community. [13]

Note the reference to “on behalf of” and “autism community”. Both of those are signifiers that it is not autistic people, but others speaking for them and those around them, who hold the power.

There also needs to be more of a neurodiversity and/or autistic pride movement to counteract the negative messaging and ableism around autism. Activities that encourage inter-autistic interactions, funded by the same government branches that support other communities, would provide opportunities for networking and mutual support.

Directions for future research

The neurodiversity movement, as a means of understanding the way autistic people fit into society, is still a movement under construction. How it situates itself among the existing disability models is a decision that will be made by those who belong to it. While it is not an autistic-only movement, autistic voices will be part of that conversation. Research, like that described here, is part of the way autistic voices can lead these discussions and community based participatory research is an important means to elevate those voices. More research led by autistic researchers and with the involvement of autistic partners, is necessary.

The use of affordances to learn from autistic students how they were able to succeed in high school and finding ways to share those affordances as repertoire in the community, is an area ripe with possibilities. Future research looking at the creation, testing, refinement, and

[13] https://autismalliance.ca/canadas-autism-strategy-to-manitoba-legislation/

sharing of affordances, especially as mediated by internet communication and social media is an area where more work needs to be done.

The shared reading approach offers many possibilities both with the autistic community and potentially with other communities for whom traditional research methods are less effective. This method has considerable untapped potential as an alternative to traditional forms of structured interviews and future work refining the process would only improve its usefulness.

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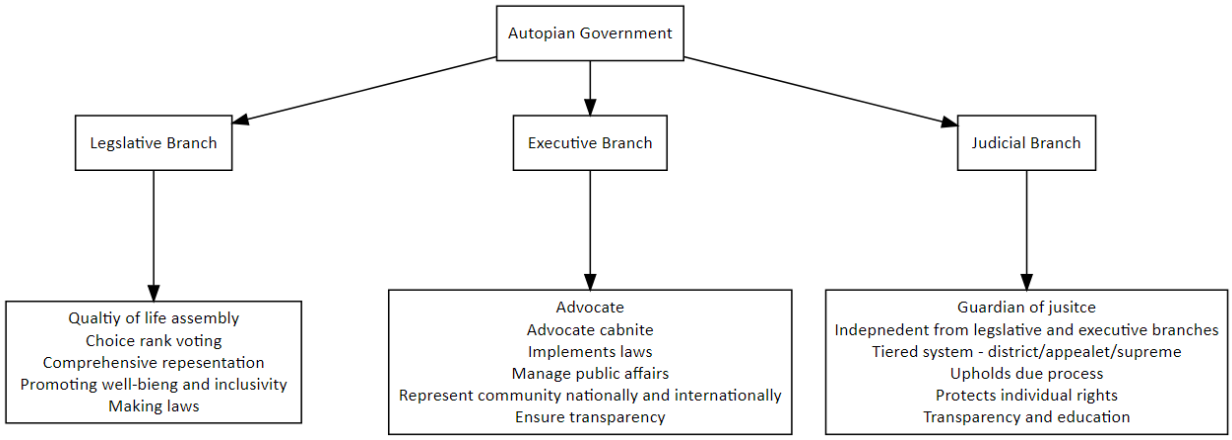
Chapter 12 Appendix I

Chapter 13 Appendix II

The following is the unedited collaborative speculative worldbuilding work written by the participants.

Governance

In the fictional society of Autopia, a democratic government has been established, uniquely designed to promote equity diversity and inclusion. Autopia's democratic system is based on principles of inclusivity, accommodation, and diversity, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. It consists of legislative, executive, and judicial branches.



The Legislative Branch

The legislative branch of the autopian government, known as the Quality of Life Assembly, is a central pillar of the democratic process in Autopia. It is responsible for enacting laws, shaping policies, and promoting the well-being and quality of life for all citizens. The assembly operates on the principles of inclusivity, diversity, and representation, ensuring that the voices of all communities are heard and considered.

One of the distinctive features of the Quality of Life Assembly is the use of a ranked-choice voting system to elect representatives. This system allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference, ensuring that elected officials have broad-based support and reflect the diverse views of the population. By employing this method, the assembly promotes a fair and inclusive electoral process, where every citizen's vote carries equal weight.

To ensure comprehensive representation, the assembly includes individuals from various backgrounds, such as autistic, neurotypical, white, black, LGBTQ, and indigenous. This diversity of perspectives and experiences enables a more nuanced understanding of the issues at hand and facilitates the development of policies and laws that cater to the needs and aspirations of all citizens. By including representatives from marginalised and underrepresented communities, the assembly actively works towards addressing historical injustices and promoting equity.

Within the assembly, public debates take place on a regular basis, allowing representatives to engage in thoughtful discussions on policies, laws, and initiatives. These debates serve as a platform for the exchange of ideas and viewpoints, fostering a democratic decision-making process that is influenced by a wide range of perspectives. By encouraging open dialogue, the assembly ensures that the policies and laws enacted reflect the collective will of the people.

The assembly's primary focus is on promoting inclusivity, accessibility, and the general well-being of all citizens. This means that the policies and laws it deliberates on are geared towards ensuring that every individual has equal opportunities and access to resources. The assembly actively supports initiatives that enhance the quality of life for all, including measures to improve healthcare, education, employment, housing, and social services. By prioritising the needs of the people, the assembly aims to create a society where all citizens can thrive and enjoy a high standard of living.

In conclusion, the legislative branch, the Quality of Life Assembly, plays a vital role in shaping Autopia's governance. Through the use of ranked-choice voting, comprehensive representation, inclusive public debates, and a focus on well-being, the assembly actively works towards creating a society that values diversity, inclusivity, and the overall quality of life for all its citizens.

The Executive Branch

The executive branch of the autopian government is designed to ensure effective governance and accountability. At its core, the executive branch is led by the Advocate, the elected leader who is entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of laws, managing public affairs, and representing the autopian community both domestically and internationally.

To ensure transparency and inclusivity, the executive branch is supported by a council of diverse individuals known as the Advocate Cabinet. This cabinet consists of representatives from various backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of the autopian population. The Advocate Cabinet serves as a collective advisory body, providing diverse guidance and expertise to the Advocate in their decision-making processes. The inclusion of individuals from different communities helps ensure that a broad range of perspectives and experiences are taken into account when formulating policies and making important executive decisions.

The Advocate, as the head of the executive branch, is responsible for upholding the principles of the autopian government, promoting the well-being of citizens, and advocating for their rights and needs. The Advocate acts as a bridge between the legislative branch and the autopian community, working closely with the Quality of Life Assembly to implement the laws and policies that have been enacted.

One of the primary roles of the Advocate and the Advocate Cabinet is to oversee the implementation of laws. They work together to ensure that the legislative decisions made by the Quality of Life Assembly are effectively put into practice. This involves coordinating with various government agencies, departments, and other stakeholders to ensure that the intent behind the laws is realised and that they have the desired impact on the autopian society.

The executive branch also plays a crucial role in managing public affairs. The Advocate, supported by the Advocate Cabinet, represents the autopian community at national and international levels. They engage in diplomatic relations, negotiate treaties and agreements, and participate in forums and conferences to promote Autopia's values and interests. The executive

branch acts as a voice for the autopian community, advocating for their rights and needs on the global stage.

Furthermore, the executive branch is responsible for addressing the concerns and issues raised by the autopian community. The Advocate and the Advocate Cabinet actively work towards ensuring that the rights of all citizens are protected and that their needs are met. They engage in dialogue with various stakeholders, including community organisations, advocacy groups, and individuals, to understand their concerns and develop policies that address them effectively.

In summary, the executive branch, led by the Advocate and supported by the Advocate Cabinet, is responsible for overseeing the implementation of laws, managing public affairs, representing the autopian community, and ensuring transparency and accountability in governance. Through their diverse expertise, commitment to inclusivity, and dedication to public service, the executive branch strives to create a government that is responsive, effective, and accountable to the needs and aspirations of all members of autopia.

The Judicial Branch

The judicial branch of the autopian government is an essential pillar of the justice system, ensuring the fair interpretation and application of laws. It is designed to uphold the principles of justice, protect individual rights, and provide a forum for the resolution of disputes and the administration of justice.

The judiciary in Autopia operates independently from the legislative and executive branches, ensuring impartiality and the separation of powers. This independence is crucial for the fair and equitable administration of justice. Judges are appointed based on their qualifications, experience, and adherence to the principles of fairness and justice.

The judicial branch consists of a hierarchical system of courts that span from local to national levels. At the local level, there are district courts that handle a wide range of cases, including civil, criminal, and administrative matters. These courts serve as the first point of contact for individuals seeking legal redress or facing legal charges.

Above the district courts, there are appellate courts that review decisions made at the lower court level. The appellate courts ensure the consistent application of laws and provide an avenue for parties dissatisfied with the outcomes of their cases to seek a review or appeal.

At the highest level of the judicial branch is the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court serves as the final arbiter of legal disputes, interpreting the constitution, and providing legal guidance and precedent for lower courts. The Supreme Court ensures the uniform application of laws and safeguards the integrity of the legal system.

The autopian judicial branch operates on the principles of due process, equality, and access to justice for all citizens. It ensures that every individual, regardless of their background or social status, has the right to a fair trial, legal representation, and the opportunity to present their case before an impartial judge.

In Autopia's judicial system, there is a commitment to promoting alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, such as mediation and arbitration. These methods provide parties with the opportunity to resolve their disputes outside of the traditional courtroom setting, fostering amicable resolutions and reducing the burden on the court system.

To ensure transparency and accountability, the judicial branch conducts its proceedings in an open and public manner, except in cases where privacy or national security concerns apply. This transparency allows citizens to observe the legal process, promotes public trust in the judiciary, and holds judges accountable for their decisions.

In addition to its role in resolving legal disputes, the judicial branch also plays a crucial role in protecting individual rights and liberties. It reviews laws and government actions to ensure their constitutionality and protects citizens from any infringement on their fundamental rights.

The autopian judicial branch also actively engages in judicial education and professional development programs to ensure the ongoing competence and integrity of judges. These programs provide continuous training and learning opportunities to judges, keeping them updated on legal developments, ethical standards, and best practices in the administration of justice. By investing in judicial education, Autopia seeks to maintain a high standard of judicial professionalism and uphold the public's trust in the judiciary.

The judicial branch also embraces technology to enhance access to justice and streamline court processes. Online platforms and digital systems are implemented to facilitate electronic filing of documents, scheduling of hearings, and access to court records. This integration of technology improves efficiency, reduces delays, and enables greater accessibility to the justice system.

Furthermore, the autopian judicial branch actively seeks to promote public understanding of the law and legal processes. It engages in outreach programs, public legal education initiatives, and community partnerships to increase awareness and knowledge of legal rights and responsibilities. By empowering citizens with legal literacy, the judiciary aims to foster a society that is informed, engaged, and actively participates in the legal system.

The judicial branch also recognizes the importance of international legal cooperation. It participates in international judicial conferences, collaborates with judicial counterparts from other nations, and adheres to international legal standards and treaties. Autopia's judiciary actively contributes to the development of global legal principles and engages in mutual assistance to combat transnational crimes and uphold human rights.

In summary, the judicial branch of the autopian government serves as the guardian of justice, ensuring the fair interpretation and application of laws. It operates independently, upholds principles of due process and equality, and protects individual rights. With a hierarchical court system, commitment to transparency, engagement in judicial education, and utilisation of technology, the judiciary in Autopia strives to provide accessible, efficient, and fair justice to all citizens.

Economics

Economic Strength:

In Autopia, economic strength is low as the citizens of the country are mostly all immigrants, or descendants of immigrants, and are people in a brand new place. The country itself is still in the process of making decisions and planning for how the country is to be run. Thus, there has not been enough time or resources for the country to have grown into a fully sustainable, independent society that is respected for its economic strength.

Economic Distribution:

Distribution in Autopia is even across the residents for two large reasons at the moment. One reason is that due to a lack of resources in the area, a lack of time, or the desire for one person to become one of the ultra rich, wealth is even. That is not to say that everyone is super rich or super poor. All families in Autopia would more so fall into the category of low to middle class. That is also not to say that nobody in Autopia isn't striving to create a great, new, innovative, and useful product. It has more to do with the history of how Autopia came to be. In the history of Autopia and its citizens, we had previously revealed the actions of the ultra rich (Jeff Bezo, Elon Musk, etc.) for how unethical they were. This makes it more likely that those in this country would want to be better than the ultra rich in the countries they left behind, sharing the wealth and helping through the extra money they gain. Additionally, those with higher incomes would be more likely to indulge in their hyperfixation if they had disposable income but were still able to live comfortably.

The other main reason that wealth is evenly distributed in Autopia is how individuals are paid for their work and services. Pay in Autopia is denoted by a base level pay of all occupations, with a pay increase based on experience. This means that all occupations (agricultural, government, labour, etc.) start on a livable wage, with an increase based on how many years total an individual has been working in that field (pay does not reset if you change from one company to another. If you already have 10 years of experience in that field, you get 10 years of experience pay). In addition to jobs being fair pay across the board, the way in which a career is chosen by the individual happens through job shadowing to help mitigate the amount of job transfers and thus increase the amount of pay an individual is able to get. Job shadowing is done for any citizen, whether they are born in the country or immigrating to the country, with the exception of an individual who already has a degree and wishes to remain in that field (imagine a teacher who wishes to remain a teacher, therefore no need for job shadowing). Job shadowing follows all general career paths (government, agriculture, labour etc.) and may begin when an individual is 16 years old, with the option for parents or guardians to allow a minor to start job shadowing as young as 14. If an individual does not decide what they would like to pursue before post secondary education is set to begin for them, they will be assigned to a job that they have the requirements for, and is in need of the most workers. A large section of undecided individuals will be placed in the agricultural section and working with E-Waste trade.

Agricultural production and trade

A large contribution from us to the other countries would be our knowledge in many aspects. We have a large focus on our technological knowledge

Taking E-waste from other countries and reforming it, e-waste is dangerous to work with, but as autistic people are seen as dangerous to other countries, they would not care much for our safety. They may pay a small fee, or the electronics we rebuild may be sold to companies or other countries for a profit.

Agurically, duties are split evenly because no one is the person.

Social Relations

In Autopia, the social fabric is intricately woven with a deep understanding and appreciation of neurodiversity. The society recognizes and celebrates the unique strengths and perspectives of its autistic population, fostering an environment of inclusivity, empathy, and mutual support.

Social relations in Autopia are characterised by a strong sense of community and interconnectedness. Autopians value collaboration and cooperation, recognizing that diverse minds working together can achieve remarkable outcomes. There is a collective commitment to creating an accessible and accommodating society that meets the needs of all its citizens.

Communication in Autopia is diverse and multifaceted. Autistic individuals are encouraged to express themselves in ways that feel comfortable and natural to them. This includes a variety of communication styles, such as verbal, written, sign language, and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) methods. Autopians are skilled listeners, practising active listening and demonstrating patience and understanding during conversations.

Social gatherings and events in Autopia are designed with the sensory sensitivities of autistic individuals in mind. Noise levels, lighting, and other environmental factors are carefully considered to create comfortable and inclusive spaces. Autopians understand and respect personal boundaries, recognizing the importance of allowing individuals to manage their sensory experiences.

The society places a strong emphasis on education and awareness about neurodiversity. Autopians actively engage in learning about different neurodivergent experiences, fostering empathy and understanding among the broader population. Neurodivergent individuals are valued for their unique perspectives and contributions, and their voices are sought after in decision-making processes.

In Autopia, social relations are built on a foundation of respect, acceptance, and equity. The society's commitment to neurodiversity ensures that all individuals, regardless of their neurotype, are embraced and included, fostering a vibrant and harmonious social fabric.

With the majority of the population being refugees from all walks of life, the biggest cultural struggle would be the language barrier. Use of peripheral translators would be a necessity in everyday life, especially in schools. It would not be surprising in decades along the line, a new mixed language/slang started to develop much like in Bladerunner. However, the need for these communication devices would have an unintentional side effect of forcing everyone to slow down, especially in service-heavy departments. Most checkout areas would be self-serve stations with language options, signage on roads and stores would need to rely on symbol language more than written word, and drive-thrus and telephone orders would struggle to stay

relevant. Sign language would be a popular neutral ground of sorts and would probably be taught in schools from an early age to help bridge the gap of new residents as well as help those with non-verbal issues. Another peripheral for gloves that translate sign language into an audible language would also be a common sight.

One issue that would be divisive among the population would be concerning Religion. While for many it may help them feel as a part of a community and give them a sense of structure and routine; a clear set of rules to determine “good” and “bad” behaviour, an equal if not greater population would probably take issue with the concept of religion entirely. A not insignificant portion of the population may have histories with religion based trauma; their early symptoms of neurodivergence being seen as signs of evil influence, and “treatment” for that being violent or mentally torturous events in their lives.

Many people would vehemently push for solid separation of Church and State due to the history of religious influence causing conflict among every level of communities. It may go to the extent that all houses of worship would have no government funding, or if they needed government assistance they would need to also double as neutral community centres.

There would still be a lot of debate, especially in the early days of the state, on which holidays would actually be recognised as state holidays. It would be a little difficult to coordinate what days everyone would get off of school if there were no majority religion to go off of for a calendar year, but at the same time people would still probably want Christmas off regardless of Christian influence.

Another contentious area would probably be in the Queer community, but not in the way one would think. A large portion of the neurodivergent population falls on the asexual-aromantic spectrum. And if a majority of the population are coming in as refugees for their status, I would unfortunately imagine a lot of them would face some kind of sexual trauma whether in the form of abuse by caretakers or even non-consensual sterilisation by government healthcare.

While most people would not bat an eye at same sex, polyamorous, or queer-platonic relationships, certain heterosexual families might actually be the ones to face hardships. Especially if they plan on having kids with a high likelihood of coming out with the same conditions the parents do. Some would struggle so much with their own trauma due to their disabilities and/or the conflict they just got out of that they would see having children as cursing others to face the same problems.

Cultural Influences

The world in which we envisioned is that there’s high usage of I-phones and Apple Watches - cable television has been replaced by streaming services like Netflix and Amazon. New innovations regarding A.I. , neural networks, and automations are constantly being invented by neurodivergent people all the time. There’s an emerging use of do-it-yourself phones which will threaten the use of the iOS and Android operating systems.Neurodiverse people will invent their

own operating system and probably grow it to one of the superior operating systems in the world. There's going to be Internet cafes all over the world where you can intersect with your friends over Zoom and in-person with your do-it-yourself phone. Coffee, fancy lattes, and tea will be served in the cafe. This is the third place for neurodiverse folks to develop relationships collectively with each other and have conversations and peacekeeping missions to change the world for the better. The hackists will create their own culture from the neuro dominant population just by organising hackathons against communist countries like North Korea, China, and Russia. Create your own phones are certainly dominant and owned by independent companies. Modular phones can be easily manufactured in minutes by neurodiverse folks and engineers who have the brainpower to dig deep into creation of a personalised smartphone to meet the needs of the user. Modular phones have their own personalised applications like mapping systems, tracking devices, contacts, internet systems, and many more. New technological inventions are constantly being created all the time and there's innovation hubs constantly being created all the time. Ethical artificial intelligence use is embraced while people connect to each other on Zoom and on the metaverse. Books can be found on Chat-GPT, in digital and paper book forms. Copying of authors' published forms is banned in our world and must contribute to our original works of art and oral teachings for the seven generations before. The military is focused on peacekeeping and on the deterrence of threats and negotiation of peace treaties. Both Western and Indigenous knowledge are respecting - maintaining their strong creative traditions in Orality and literature while embracing their new works in film and TV productions on streaming services and platforms. Protecting Mother Earth and the Sky Woman is of uttermost importance in ensuring the teachings are protected by the seven generations ahead of us. Both Indigenous Spirituality and non-religious stances are celebrated compared to a couple of years ago when Christianity was the dominant religion in our world. The use of Indigenous medicines like sage, cedar, sweetgrass is highly empathised for the curing of physical and mental diseases and spending time in the tipi in Indigenous people while non-Indigenous people are encouraged to seek out social prescribing by encouraging them to be in immersed in the other cultures, go to social fires, and experience the natural environment around them

Historical Events

REVERSE UNO MOTHERFUCKERS
I would like to point out that this one video in particular inspired a lot of my thinking for the historical events I envisioned: Why The Death Note Would FAIL! Interesting watch

During the events of the Ukraine-Russia Crisis, after learning about Elon Musk purposefully trying to limit telecommunications with Ukraine to support his Russian interests, dark web hackers decided to stick it to him and double down on their independent assistance with the Ukrainian forces, and protesting Russian factions. Before the end of 2024, Putin's regime had fallen due to attacks on all sides, and the Russian oligarchs were scattering.

Emboldened by this, the disorganised movement of hacktivists grew in population and started setting their sights on North Korea since it historically had been influenced by Russian interest. Hackers kept breaking through the information blockades, starting innocently enough by spamming international memes in place of ads on different whitelisted sites. In particular, Obama memes actually started getting the general population's curiosity, and sparked more efforts to communicate with the outside world, helping to break free of the propaganda. Through international coordination for evacuating asylum seekers, and far more aggressive digital

attacks on NK's automated drone systems, the regime started to fall and South Korean forces were able to push upwards in claiming territories.

With two countries destabilised thanks to untraceable "Anonymous"-like forces, some super powers got a bit nervous. It did not take long for the disorganised group's attention to be drawn to China in particular. Tencent and other Communist Party-backed software companies were crippled in DDoS attacks. One after another, it went the same; starting with turning their main websites into meme pits, then exposing just how much data they were collecting on citizens and selling off to the government. Even the government run ID and banking apps were taken down in the end leading to a long civil war with lots of international attention.

It wasn't just governments either, individuals and companies easily became targets as well. Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and a number of fossil fuel mining operations were threatened over the years. Their banking records were exposed to the public, incriminating footage, blackmail, and fraud scandals lead to an upset in the global economy that was already shaken by recessions and housing collapses.

Though tracking down "members" of the hacktivists was nearly impossible due to the lack of leadership, organisation and the sheer number of proxies used, some participants were found through bragging about it on social media. Of those found, an odd pattern was discovered; correlation between their dedication, aptitude and those that were diagnosed with some kind of neuro-divergence. The participants admitted that they joined in on the campaigns when they found them through social media; reddit, tumblr, twitter, discord servers, even minecraft servers. It varied from simple pranks, to making new friends in the affected areas through games, to wanting to help those friends improve their lives by changing the conditions they lived in.

The group took 4chan's old adage of "weaponized Autism" seriously by accident.

Superpowers took notice of this in a very big way. Since the movements were disorganised messes led by maybe a few somewhat charismatic members, Governments believed that there could be a way to contain/control the powers that destroyed multiple regimes through social media subterfuge. Government agencies would create fake online profiles/influencers to gain the trust of individuals and enter their social circles to identify threats, cut off their connections (citing "piracy" from the internet providers), and take them in on suspicion charges.

When checking the targets' social media or while interviewing them, most participants identified as disabled in some way, using the internet as a way to connect with people better, and voiced dissatisfaction with the lack of assistant programs from their home governments, even if they were from countries with typically high standards of living.

Under the guise of wanting to provide better social assistance programs to the people, the US, Canada and many other governments started to provide neurodivergence testing for free at early ages to identify possible future radicals. Then they offered those disabled and with social anxiety to continue whatever their education level was with online learning. This resulted in

further monitoring and isolation, pushing the individuals to become more dependent on their government programs for needs and more receptive to their influence in joining cyber security programs as a form of self-support while remaining under government supervision.

One of the few common places where autistics gathered for socialising came in the form of board game cafes and the like. From there, rehashing similar experiences and finding a disturbing pattern forming, protest and resistance started to form.

Catalogue

Historical Events

Historical event	The Seattle Riot AKA the Black Deck Weekend
Types	historical, political, conflict
Stats and tags	Event date, Seattle Event
Narrative description	What began as an unfortunate coincidence became one of the most infamous events in the rebellion's early history. One hotel hosted both a furry/game/anime convention and a big time tech business conference during the same weekend. After it was discovered just who was attending the business conference just a few floors above them (major players in the military tech industry discussing how to further monopolise engineering students' options out of graduation. Also, investors in inhumane Congo cobalt mines), the convention's game room quickly devolved into decks of red and black card MTG decks. Cosplayers used their costumes to hide their identities as they marched up the hotels' stairs and interrupted the conference, demanding the millionaires answer for their crimes against humanity. This was a smokescreen for the more technologically inclined to hack into the executive's less secure (hotel wifi) connected devices and start wreaking havoc on their companies' systems. One in-person protester was actually killed by a security guard when their taser caused a fatal heart attack. That incited far more violent retaliation on both sides. Action spilled out onto the streets, and it served as a breaking point both for the population and the government after years of economic and civil unease prior, due to the collapse of Amazon and China.

Historical event	The Fall of Cayman Banks
Types	Historical, political, criminal
Stats and tags	Event date, Online, Cayman Islands Event
Narrative description	The biggest heist in history. More than a dozen tax-haven, thought untraceable bank accounts were struck all at once in the 2030s when the global financial crisis was at its worst. Over $200 Billion dollars USD was stolen that day, syphoned away by a massive daisy chain of bots transferring in small amounts to each other before finally depositing the money into various paypal accounts, GoFundMe and Kickstarter campaigns, various charity fundraisers, and funding efforts for low-income housing development worldwide. In the investigation of the theft itself, so many white collar crimes were exposed to the public; insider trading, email chains admitting to war crimes and knowing slave trade support, etc. A not-insignificant amount of that money found its way into the development of the Neurodivergent-Disabled Independence Movement (the more friendly branding of the rebellion).

Historical event	Anasi's Web
Types	historical, natural
Stats and tags	2032, North America, Anasi's Web Event
Narrative description	What was thought to have been a massive cyber attack in 2032 took down the internet all across North America for several days. In that time, smaller homemade wireless networks were set up and connected to each other across most of the major population centres to keep things running. It showed just how badly the US and Canada's infrastructure could be damaged due to the current monopolies companies had in providing internet. When the internet was restored, it was discovered that the outage wasn't due to a cyber attack, but a group of sharks attacking undersea fibre optic cables. The name was later adopted by an independently owned IM service that overtook Discord.

Historical event	Min-Max Initiative
Types	historical, political, education

Stats and tags	date, America, Canada, UK, Various EU countries, China and Korea Government program
Narrative description	From an early age, children are tested for neurodivergence and how it influences their capacity to learn. Min-Max is/was a government operated program that became controversial historically. It took children who tested positive for math/computer science enhanced neurodivergence and forced them into programming and engineering focused learning. They also utilised at-home learning opportunities to further isolate and control those students. It was later shown to have a detrimental effect on the subjects' mental health not only due to the social isolation, but for their self-worth being entirely dependent on servitude.

Historical event	Kids for Sale, Operation: Brains in a Jar
Types	historical, criminal
Stats and tags	Event date, Mid-West US Event, Vees
Narrative description	The largest to date domestic children trafficking scandal, and the Vees were the ones to bust it. A CPS database was breached, and the names and addresses of disabled children at impoverished foster homes were stolen. A criminal organisation started to coordinate the purchase of those children from those foster parents. Thankfully, a few foster families were able to report the suspicious activity of the people trying to subtly offer money for the kids. While the FBI and local police were alerted to the situation, it was thanks to Vee network investigation that the trucks carrying the kids and the compound they were being kept in were located and intercepted. The public's trust in the police and military took a serious hit after the operation, especially after an investigation stated that certain government departments could be potential buyers for the children in the future.

Historical event	Q-Anon Riot
Types	historical, political, conflict
Stats and tags	date, London, England Event, Irish independence, Q-Anon, Vees
Narrative description	Q-Anon, a rather infamous conspiracy forum, learned about the Rebellion's actions and wildly misunderstood the underlying goals, especially after Vees

	started to fight against the police. In the UK under the guise of becoming Vees, tried to gain access to weapons and intelligence. After they were denied, they attempted an assault on the British Parliament on the day that Ireland was arguing for independence. It turned into a two day hostage situation and ended with over a dozen people dead, and more than 40 hospitalised. Vees' reputation took a huge hit after that and far stricter recruitment practices were put in place.

Historical event	Steps Taken For All
Types	historical, political, protest
Stats and tags	date, Ottawa, Canada; Washington, D.C.; London, England
Narrative description	A massive public protest taken by physically disabled individuals in front of Canadian and British Parliament buildings, the US supreme court, and several government office buildings, all at once. Wheelchairs and walkers were used to create a blockade of sorts at the fronts of the buildings, while the individuals tried to crawl up stairs into the offices of legislation to argue over inaccessibility, unfair treatment and isolation they experienced.

Items

Item	Loud Hands
Types	AAC, translation, communication
Stats and tags	Item: translation gloves
Narrative description	Gloves with built-in speakers in the wrists to interpret sign language for those non-verbal/HOH. While Sign is more commonly taught in elementary and middle school post 2040, these still help for those still learning or unfamiliar. Must be calibrated for dialects and personal abbreviations. Software is open-source.

Item	Doodle Board
Types	AAC, communication, education
Stats and tags	Item: magnetic writing board
Narrative description	Pads with magnetic sand in them used for writing that can easily be cleared. These are the preferred method of non-verbal communication in schools because they do not use paper and they avoid the invasive scent of white

	board markers. When students want to answer/ask a question but do not want to/are unable to speak, they write on their board.

Item	neo alphasmart 3000
Types	AAC, communication, education
Stats and tags	Real Item: stenography device
Narrative description	Keyboards with small built-in screens for typing. These provide typing ability without the distraction of internet access like laptops do. Very useful for those with ADHD, or lack the dexterity for handwriting notes on the go. Used in both schools and work environments.

Item	Selective Hearing
Types	Hearing-aid, noise filter, ear protectors
Stats and tags	Item: noise cancelling device
Narrative description	Small hearing-aid like accessories with noise cancelling capabilities. They can be customized what noises they filter out using an open-source sound library filled with samples. For example, in busy areas they would cancel out the sound of cars, eating, or chairs scraping while allowing the wearer to still hear voices directly around them.

Item	Fresh Mask
Types	Scent filter, breathing aid, medical mask, voice changer
Stats and tags	Item: personal humidifier
Narrative description	Plastic/mechanical masks meant to go over someone's mouth and nose. These have built-in filters and humidifiers to help those with breathing issues operate outside. They help to neutralise scents like smoke, perfumes, etc, and filter out germs as well. These are a more common sight in the winter time as some struggle to breathe colder, dry air, and they want to help avoid flu seasons. Highly customizable, people often 3D print out new outer shells for them. Common styles are Darth Vader, Skulls, and Oni Mask. Often used in combination with Loud Hands, or have built-in voice changers/autotune.

Item	Magic The Gathering
Types	Game, secret code, covert communication
Stats and tags	Real Item: card game

Narrative description	A common competitive TCG that also became a special coded communication method during rebellion meetups. The colour of the deck the player used indicated what was going on: White meant supplies or personnel were being provided or requested, often this meant a new ally was found in high places Red meant non-violent protests/pranks were being organised Green meant the transportation of civilians, smuggling people in or out of the area Blue meant there was important movement online, either a site was compromised or having an impact on the physical world Black meant violence was needed, either in protest or disrupting police/military activity Location, Character and Spell cards became intricate codes for who, where and what was going on. (Think like how Pai Sho in Avatar was the secret code for the White Lotus. I don't actually know Magic TCG that well, so if someone wants to adjust the card meanings be my guest)

Item	Gravity Line Clothing
Types	Clothing, sensory safe
Stats and tags	Item: clothing, cape, poncho
Narrative description	Specially weighted clothes that have become popular among the autistic community, particularly their capes/ponchos. All their items are sewn in a way to keep the seams hidden, and every style is offered in different fabrics for those with texture sensitivities. They also offer in-store screen printing for shirt designs. Their tagline is "Gravity keeps you grounded"

Item	Minecraft
Types	Game, secret code, covert communication, education, cultural
Stats and tags	Real Item: video game
Narrative description	One of the most autistic games in history. It's actually a main staple of educational games for teaching chemistry, geology, geometry, and physics. It's also grown even more in cultural importance for how it was used for communication and planning during the haydays of the rebellion. Funny enough, it is used professionally for urban planning as well

Item	Solar Windows
Types	Construction material, window, power generation
Stats and tags	Item: window Real
Narrative description	Slightly tinted windows that are actually solar panels. Very common on skyscrapers and apartment buildings post 2035.

Item	NutriRight
Types	Food, sensory safe
Stats and tags	Item: Snack
Narrative description	Snack food brand originally intended for weight loss that took off in the Neurodivergent community for its sensory friendly recipes. They consist of Cereals, candies, leathers and Juices that help cover nutritional and calorie needs for people that have sensory issues.

Item	Street Car
Types	Public transportation, trolley
Stats and tags	Item: trolley car Real
Narrative description	Gaining popularity in city centres again for populations that cannot drive, nearly every road in Autopia that isn't in a residential neighbourhood has trolley tracks installed. Buses are still used. After the attempt at self-driving cars resulting in several major accidents, the trolley became much more popular.

Item	Witch Time
Types	Drug, treatment, addictive, harmful, perception altering
Stats and tags	Item: drug
Narrative description	At one point it was an experimental drug to treat tourettes and ADHD symptoms, it became an unfortunately popular street drug. Highly addictive and dangerous, users claim the drug slows down time for them so they have space to think and take in stimuli without being overwhelmed. Prolonged use of the substance is known to cause seizures and nerve damage.

Item	Prosper-Us
Types	Video game, AI, farming
Stats and tags	Item: video game
Narrative description	A Farm Sim game that helps to develop AI and techniques for mechanised farming ventures. Trusted users are even allowed to take control of various pieces of equipment on real farms to do tasks such as spreading seeds and fertiliser with remote controlled tractors, infiltrating flocks of livestock with camouflaged drones to take stock of animal well being, etc.

Item	Vitali-Tic
Types	Health monitor, watch, personal tech
Stats and tags	Item: Smart watch
Narrative description	A health-monitoring watch/device that can be set to various metrics (Pulse, blood sugar, cortisone production, dopamine and serotonin levels). This device DOES NOT have wireless capabilities so it cannot be hacked. Sometimes looks like a Pipboy from Fallout depending on how many functions it serves.

Item	“You’re Valid” Button
Types	Medical device, therapy, treatment, anti-anxiety, memory difficulties, de-stress
Stats and tags	Item: Medical device
Narrative description	Commonly used for patients with anxiety and memory problems, a therapist will record phrases of affirmation or reminders that can help ground a person in a high stress situation. The words of comfort spoken by a recording of a friendly voice have shown to be a massive help. Think one of those “That Was Easy” buttons from Staples, but with a list of therapy talk when you press it instead.

Item	Greenhouse
Types	Agricultural
Stats and tags	Item: greenhouse
Narrative description	A greenhouse designed to simulate the desired conditions for any plant the user wishes to grow. A panel on the outside of the greenhouse allows users to monitor, adjust and track the process of their plants. Monitor information is also linked to an app which allows for monitoring away from the greenhouse.

Item	Collection Bot
Types	Agricultural, robot

Stats and tags	Item: robot
Narrative description	A robot that is programmed to collect and store produce gather inside the greenhouse. This robot will gather the produce as specified within the control app and deposit the collected produce in a cooler that preserves the food until the owner can retrieve the food.

Item	Compost Bot
Types	Agricultural, robot
Stats and tags	Item: robot
Narrative description	A robot equipped with a scanner to assess the health of plants within the greenhouse. Any plants found with a disease, dead or rotten and prune them from the plant, removing the whole plant if necessary. The removed plant is placed within a compost bucket to be redistributed once the next plant cycle has begun.

Item	Planting Bot
Types	Agricultural, robot
Stats and tags	Item: robot
Narrative description	A robot to collect seeds, dig holes, plant and water any crops inside the greenhouse at the owners request. Will also collect and distribute compost gathered from the Compost Bot to aid in the fertilization of crops. Docking station is equipped with an external slot for seeds to the placed inside and organized automatically within the robots built in storage.

Item	E-Waste Hazmat Mask
Types	E-waste
Stats and tags	Item: PPE
Narrative description	A large full face mask, with a built in respirator. Built into the glass of the mask is a HUD system to give real time updates on the wearer's health (think Jarvis from iron man but silent - See next entry for more detail). Built in microphone and speaker to allow workers to communicate without having to remove the mask and risk health complications.

Item	E-Waste HUD System (HUDson)
Types	E-waste, AI
Stats and tags	Item: PPE
Narrative description	HUDson is linked through a cloud network providing live data to employers and workers as needed. HUDson will give the worker stats on their health, including body temperature, oxygen levels and level of thirst/dehydration. If a function falls below a safe minimum, an alert will be sent to both the worker

	and the employee with steps to take to regain a safe body condition. HUDson also includes a tracking system linked to each worker's profile, in case of emergency where a worker is missing. HUDson will additionally log any early shift starts, overtime hours worked and break lengths to ensure a safe, fair and stress free work environment.

Item	E-Waste Handheld Recycling Scanner
Types	E-waste, scanner
Stats and tags	Item: PPE
Narrative description	A handheld scanner used to identify the materials within a product of e-waste. Allows the workers to work faster and safer as it identifies any and all hazardous materials and the proper protocol to work with the materials. If it detects a widespread serious health hazard, a notice will be sent to all workers with instructions for proper evacuation until the situation can be dealt with.

Item	E-Waste Protective Jumpsuit
Types	E-waste
Stats and tags	Item: PPE
Narrative description	A sturdy thick jumpsuit to protect the worker and their clothing from any chemical spills. Jumpsuit is also reinforced using teflon to help avoid any cuts or piercing from any broken e-waste.

Item	E-Waste Boots
Types	E-waste
Stats and tags	Item: PPE
Narrative description	Steeled toed, puncture proof boots. Calf high and tight around the leg to minimise risk of chemical spills down the leg.

Item	E-Waste Gloves
Types	E-waste, AAC
Stats and tags	Item: PPE
Narrative description	Elbow high chemical resistant gloves. Gloves include a small digital window that can be extended in a hologram allowing for nonverbal workers to use an automated text-to-voice, as sign language can be hard to interpret in bulky gloves.

Locations

Location	Indie-Help Apartments
Types	Residential
Stats and tags	Location: group home
Narrative description	A group home/communal living set up that is actually getting normalised and popularised. You have a typical apartment set up, but each floor/section has a communal area and regular (optional) community meet ups. Chore help can be easily requested between neighbours for those with disability, you can tell your neighbours your available times if someone needs help or to visit, and welfare checks are easier performed for people who would otherwise live alone. Kind of like college dorm living, but hopefully better living conditions. Each section would also have a small store for quick groceries and necessities to help people who have trouble getting out. This would help to decrease social isolation in those that would have needed to rely on the internet for interaction otherwise.

Location	Rooftop Community Gardens
Types	Residential, agricultural
Stats and tags	Location: garden
Narrative description	With apartment living being the most common situation in Autopia, several have started rooftop vegetable gardens to help with food costs. Some places even have chicken coops.

Location	Autopolis
Types	City, capital, Autopia
Stats and tags	Location: City
Narrative description	The capital city of Autopia, known as Autopolis, is a vibrant metropolis that combines modernity with a deep appreciation for nature. Autopolis benefits from a picturesque setting characterized by rolling hills, lush greenery, and a majestic river flowing through its heart. The terrain features a harmonious blend of urban landscapes and natural beauty, with parks, gardens, and tree-lined streets seamlessly integrated into the cityscape. Autopolis covers a significant area, making it a spacious and sprawling capital. The city is home to a diverse population, with estimates placing it at around 2 million residents. The inhabitants of Autopolis are known for their warmth, inclusivity, and their commitment to sustainable living, which is reflected in the city's infrastructure and policies. The architecture of Autopolis is a blend of modern and traditional styles, showcasing the city's rich history and progressive mindset. Skyscrapers and contemporary buildings stand alongside historic landmarks, creating a captivating skyline. The city's commitment to sustainability is evident in the presence of eco-friendly structures, such as green buildings and solar-

	powered facilities. The overall condition of the buildings is well-maintained, with a focus on preserving the city's heritage while embracing innovative design and technology. In Autopolis, you will find a variety of buildings, including government offices, cultural institutions, residential complexes, educational facilities, and commercial centers. The city's infrastructure is well-developed, with efficient transportation systems, including an extensive network of public transit options. Pedestrian-friendly streets and dedicated cycling lanes encourage active lifestyles and reduce traffic congestion. The people of Autopolis take pride in their city, and efforts are made to maintain cleanliness and preserve the natural surroundings. Parks, gardens, and recreational spaces are carefully maintained, providing residents with ample opportunities to enjoy outdoor activities and connect with nature. Overall, Autopolis embodies a harmonious blend of urban development and environmental consciousness, making it a captivating and livable capital city for the fictional society of Autopia.

Location	Parliament Building
Types	Government, Autopolis, Autopia
Stats and tags	Location: Parliament
Narrative description	The Parliament Building in Autopolis stands as an awe-inspiring symbol of democratic governance and architectural grandeur. Nestled majestically in the heart of the city, the building commands attention with its striking design and monumental presence. Incorporating elements of both classical and contemporary styles, the Parliament Building captivates visitors and locals alike with its timeless beauty and meticulous craftsmanship. The exterior of the Parliament Building showcases a harmonious blend of stately elegance and innovative design. Towering columns, reminiscent of ancient Greek and Roman architecture, line the façade, while intricate carvings and ornate detailing adorn the walls. The structure is crafted from a combination of locally sourced stone and gleaming glass, creating a captivating interplay of light and shadow throughout the day. As visitors step into the grand entrance, they are greeted by a soaring atrium that stretches several stories high. Bathed in natural light streaming through a magnificent glass dome, the atrium creates a sense of openness and transparency—a visual representation of the democratic ideals that the Parliament upholds.

	Moving deeper into the building, the main legislative chamber unveils itself in all its splendor. The chamber is a masterpiece of design, featuring a sweeping semicircular layout that ensures every seat has an unobstructed view of the proceedings. The walls are adorned with murals depicting scenes from Autopia's history, celebrating its achievements and honoring its diverse culture. A commanding central podium takes center stage, where passionate speeches and debates resonate with the energy of democracy. The Parliament Building also houses a range of functional spaces to support the work of lawmakers and facilitate public engagement. State-of-the-art committee rooms, conference halls, and libraries are thoughtfully integrated throughout the building, providing spaces for collaboration, research, and public discourse. Outside, the grounds surrounding the Parliament Building are meticulously landscaped, featuring manicured gardens, tranquil water features, and statues paying tribute to influential figures in Autopia's history. The expansive plaza in front of the building serves as a gathering place for citizens, where they can exercise their right to assemble and voice their opinions.

Location	Social Equity Party Headquarters
Types	Social Equity Party
Stats and tags	Location: Political headquarters
Narrative description	Nestled in the vibrant downtown district of Autopolis, the headquarters of The Social Equity Party embodies the party's commitment to inclusivity and social justice. The building itself is a beacon of progressive design, featuring a sleek and modern façade that seamlessly blends with the surrounding urban environment. The interior is characterized by open spaces, fostering a sense of collaboration and transparency. Bright, welcoming colors adorn the walls, reflecting the party's emphasis on diversity and equality. The headquarters is equipped with state-of-the-art technology, enabling party members to engage with constituents, conduct research, and strategize on key policy initiatives. Meeting rooms are designed to encourage dialogue and consensus-building, serving as spaces where members can discuss and shape their vision for a more equitable society.

Location	Global Unity Party Headquarters
Types	Global Unity Party
Stats and tags	Location: Political headquarters
Narrative description	Situated in a bustling commercial district of Autopolis, the headquarters of The Global Unity Party stands as a testament to the party's international outlook and commitment to global cooperation. The building's architecture harmoniously blends elements from various cultures, symbolizing the party's belief in unity and collaboration across borders. The exterior façade features a

	fusion of contemporary and traditional design, creating a visually striking and culturally inclusive atmosphere. Inside, the headquarters exudes an atmosphere of diplomacy and connectivity. A spacious lobby welcomes visitors with a display of flags from different nations, symbolizing the party's commitment to fostering international relations. The building boasts a multimedia conference center, where party members engage in discussions with global leaders and organize events promoting cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. The headquarters also houses a research and policy department dedicated to addressing global challenges and advocating for sustainable development on a worldwide scale.

Location	Progressive Future Party Headquarters
Types	Progressive Future Party
Stats and tags	Location: Political headquarters
Narrative description	Nestled in a suburban neighborhood of Autopolis, the headquarters of The Progressive Future Party embodies the party's vision for a forward-thinking and sustainable prosperous society. The building is designed with an emphasis on environmental consciousness, featuring green rooftops, solar panels, and rainwater harvesting systems. The architecture seamlessly integrates with the surrounding natural landscape, creating a tranquil and eco-friendly atmosphere. Inside, the headquarters exudes a sense of innovation and progress. Open-plan workspaces encourage collaboration and idea-sharing among party members. The building incorporates sustainable materials and energy-efficient technology, showcasing the party's commitment to mitigating climate change and promoting renewable energy. The headquarters also includes a community engagement center, where the party conducts workshops, seminars, and public forums on topics such as green initiatives, social welfare, and technological advancements. An adjacent community garden serves as a symbol of the party's dedication to sustainable agriculture and local food production.

Characters

Character	Skynet
Types	AI,
Stats and tags	Character: Government AI
Narrative description	The colloquial term adopted during the rebellion for government plants/AI that tried to invade organised group or private chats for rebels. They would post all over the common social media platforms that the governments found most rebels drawn towards and try to ingratiate themselves with suspected individuals, trying to get invited into group chats to spy on activity. This quickly backfired, as any account that was labelled as Skynet was either blocked, or

	fed faulty intel to throw the spy organisations off the rebels' trail. One famous instance was when the rebels instead fed around a dozen individual Skynet accounts into a single group chat and watched them fumble around each other, AI feeding off of AI.

Character	Charlotte Madison AKA StaticFluffle
Types	Autistic, Trans-woman, furry, game developer, streamer
Stats and tags	Character: Rebel leader
Narrative description	A streamer-turned-leader of the rebellion in the early days. An autistic trans-woman indie game developer, she was big in the tech furry community. She hosted many fundraisers for trans and disabled youth, so it was only a matter of time before she stumbled upon the growing conspiracy of how governments were treating people like herself. She helped lead information campaigns for the general public, while also supporting the digital side of the rebellion.

Character	Josef Keegan-Wright AKA Yoobiel00
Types	Male, lurker, hacker, activist
Stats and tags	Character: Rebel
Narrative description	A man more on the mischief side of the rebellion's origins, he was a forum lurker that helped to organise large scale cyber-attack/pranks that got the governments' attention in the first place. His signature was a gif of a dancing owl that would play while documents were being overwritten or deleted. Eventually his actions turned more altruistic when it came to light one of his friends from an online shooter was in real danger due to the Ukraine-Russia war.

Character	3ndL3ss (Real Name Unknown)
Types	Artist, sex worker, furry, physically disabled, martyr
Stats and tags	Character: Rebel
Narrative description	An artist known mostly for their porn work, they and their contemporaries were threatened by the increasing stranglehold of regulation governments were putting on the internet. With their livelihood at risk, once again as part of the furry community, they were instrumental in helping to rally the more technologically gifted in their stead, and help maintain communication with various communities. Not much is known about their real life, but they said on multiple occasions that they were physically disabled and that their art was the only thing they could do to support themself financially. They dropped off the grid around the time police were starting to arrest those in suspicion of conspiracy, so it was assumed they were one of the people taken in and became almost a martyr figure going forward.

Character	Devon Coalton

Types	YouTuber, legal
Stats and tags	Character: Rebel
Narrative description	A law school dropout due to financial reasons, Coalton turned to Youtube to try and utilise his education and support himself and his family. He started by analysing how law was portrayed in the media, citing real life sources and scoring movies, shows etc on how well they complied with real life law. It soon devolved into him quickly tearing apart “copaganda” media for how often they normalised unconstitutional police behaviour, citing real life instances of such. He hosted many videos on teaching people their rights and how those rights are regularly violated by police, companies etc, especially those in minorities. His channel and social media accounts were actually attacked/taken down multiple times for exposing unlawful behaviour in government actions, but that only got his videos shared around more. When he was actually arrested, thousands rallied for his freedom and funds were raised for his release and support of his family. Afterwards he turned his attention completely to bringing attention to inhumane policies that were being put in place in countries post-NK collapse.

Character	Vtuber Ai-a
Types	Chinese Government, propaganda, streamer
Stats and tags	Character: Chinese Government agent
Narrative description	A Vtuber made and sponsored by the Chinese Government to spread propaganda and gather information on the population. She promoted software and sites to her viewers that would steal their personal information and plant spyware/viruses on their devices. Her streams were actually one of the first targets of the movement after the end of the Russian conflict when they were still figuring out how much power they had to influence real world events. A hacker group took over one of her streams and started broadcasting just how much spyware was mining from them in the background with the programs she promoted to them. The final attack was taking down the stream entirely and playing every Winnie the Pooh movie and TV episode with an Obama AI voice Vtuber doing commentary over it.

Character	Kenneth and Rebecca Gilder+Family
Types	Colorado, USA, vloggers, physically disabled, neurodivergent, abuse, cult
Stats and tags	Character: Family
Narrative description	In the 2030s, The Gilders were known as family vloggers calling their channel *“The Golden Children”*, taking residence in Colorado. They had four children, two of which were physically disabled but all were suspected of being neurodivergent. Despite the questionable at best methods for raising their children, the channel had a substantial following. These methods included not allowing any of the children doors on their rooms, the eldest sister (13-16 during the channel’s run) doing the majority of the house work, all of the children having to wear a bodycam during their limited social outings, and even doctors appointments being documented on the channel. Things came to a

	head when the second oldest child managed to run away from home to two counties over and reported his parents for abuse. It was discovered the parents were a part of a small time cult that believed in faith healing and corporal punishment, leading to the two children's physical impairment and all the children having histories of being beaten and starved. The children were homeschooled, their only sign that their lifestyle was not normal was actually exposure to Young Children's adventure novels like Percy Jackson and the like.

Character	Dr. Jordan Steksy-Jones
Types	Social media, medical treatment, homoeopathic
Stats and tags	Character: medical treatment provider
Narrative description	A former physio-therapist that gained a following on social media for his "medical life hacks" that became popular for people who had limited access/funds for professional medical care. Eventually his life hacks started to get more and more extreme, especially when he got into fields outside of his expertise like nutrition and psychology. He started getting sponsored by dubious at best homoeopathic supplements and equipment. Eventually one of these products advertised as a homoeopathic cure for ADHD and wound up putting around 40 children in the hospital for seizures.

Character	Dr. Mackenzie Ahlberg
Types	Medical research, eugenics
Stats and tags	Character: medical treatment provider
Narrative description	A controversial figure in history for pushing for more studies on prenatal testing of various disabilities and neurological disorders. The experimental testing she was able to do did not provide very much reliable data on whether a child would have some of the disabilities she was testing for, but the fact that the tests were taking place at all started a new wave of Eugenics research and controversy.

Character	Dr. Emily Patel
Types	Social Equity Party
Stats and tags	Character: Politician
Narrative description	Dr. Emily Patel is a petite woman in her mid-fifties, with jet-black hair streaked with silver, worn in a professional bob cut. Her eyes, deep brown and ever thoughtful, reflect a calm and steady determination. Known for her minimalist sartorial choices and signature round glasses, she carries an air of approachability and quiet authority. These traits, combined with her empathetic disposition and keen intellect, make her an effective and respected leader. As the founder and leader of The Social Equity Party, Emily is driven by a dogged belief in the transformational power of systemic change and her unwavering commitment to creating a more equitable society.

	Emily was born and raised in a small town in Massachusetts to working-class parents. From a young age, she was keenly aware of the disparities that existed within her community and the wider society. This early awareness drove her to pursue a degree in Sociology from Harvard University, followed by a PhD from Yale. Her formative years were marked by academic excellence, dogged pursuit of social justice, and a deepening understanding of the structural inequalities that permeate society. Her experiences as a social scientist and educator have shaped her belief in the need for systemic change to address these inequalities. In the present day, Emily leads The Social Equity Party with an unwavering commitment to its core principles. She is driven by a belief in the power of policy to bring about transformative change and continues to advocate for policies that address income inequality, systemic discrimination, and access to education and healthcare. Despite the challenges that come with leading a political party, Emily remains steadfast in her pursuit of a society where everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.

Character	Antonio Torres
Types	Social Equity Party
Stats and tags	Character: Politician
Narrative description	Antonio Torres is a tall and charismatic man in his early forties, with a shaved head and a warm, engaging smile. His dark brown eyes exude charm and kindness, and his casual yet polished style reflects his roots in the vibrant and diverse city of Los Angeles. Antonio's magnetic personality and innate ability to connect with people from all walks of life have been instrumental in his role as Director of Outreach. His own experiences as a first-generation immigrant fuel his passion for social justice and his drive to create more inclusive communities. Born to Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles, Antonio's early life was marked by financial hardship and cultural dislocation. These experiences ignited in him a passion for social justice and the desire to improve the lives of marginalized communities. He studied sociology and political science at the University of Southern California, where he became actively involved in community organizing. This experience not only cemented his commitment to social justice but also equipped him with the skills needed to effect change at a grassroots level. Today, Antonio leverages his experiences and skills to build connections with communities across the country. His goal is to dismantle barriers to success for immigrants and people of color, and his motivation is rooted in his personal experiences. Despite the challenges inherent in his role, Antonio remains committed to his goal and works tirelessly to ensure that The Social Equity Party's policies reflect the needs and aspirations of the communities it seeks to serve.

Character	Samantha ‘Sam’ Blake
Types	Social Equity Party

Stats and tags	Character: Politician
Narrative description	Samantha ‘Sam’ Blake is a woman in her mid-thirties, tall and athletic, with short, curly red hair and bright green eyes that sparkle with intelligence and determination. She is known for her sharp suits, the colorful sneakers she pairs with them, and the wheelchair she uses due to a congenital disorder. Her disability has never deterred her; instead, it has fueled her resolve. As the Policy Director of the party, Sam is firm, assertive, and always ready to challenge the status quo. Her motivation comes from a deeply ingrained belief in the power of policy to bring about social change. Sam was born and raised in Chicago, and from a young age, she was determined not to let her disability define her limitations. Her parents, both lawyers, instilled in her a strong sense of justice and a belief in the power of law to effect change. She excelled in her studies, earning a scholarship to study law at Northwestern University. Her focus on civil rights law was inspired by her own experiences with discrimination and her desire to ensure equal rights for all. Presently, as the Policy Director of The Social Equity Party, Sam is at the forefront of drafting and promoting the party's policies. She is driven by the desire to create a more equitable society and believes that policies addressing income inequality, accessibility, and diversity are key to achieving this goal. Despite the often daunting task of navigating the complexities of policy-making, Sam remains steadfast and committed, driven by her desire to use her skills and influence to effect meaningful social change.

Character	Dr. Amina Johnson
Types	Global Unity Party
Stats and tags	Character: Politician
Narrative description	Dr. Amina Johnson is a remarkable figure with a commanding presence. Standing tall at 6 feet, she has a regal bearing and an air of confidence that draws people towards her. Her striking features are accentuated by her expressive eyes, framed by a pair of stylish glasses. Dr. Johnson's warm smile and engaging demeanor put others at ease, making her an effective communicator and leader. She exudes a sense of authority and compassion, earning her the respect and admiration of party members and supporters alike. Born and raised in a diverse neighborhood in Detroit, Dr. Johnson has always been attuned to the struggles faced by marginalized communities. She grew up in a close-knit family that instilled values of equality, justice, and empathy in her from an early age. Her academic pursuits in Social Anthropology and later, a Ph.D. in International Relations, deepened her understanding of systemic discrimination and its impact on society. It was during her research travels and interactions with individuals from various cultural backgrounds that she realized the pressing need for a party dedicated to fostering inclusivity and combating discrimination. Today, as the Party Leader of The Global Unity Party, Dr. Johnson is driven by her unwavering commitment to creating a society where every individual feels valued and included. She uses her persuasive speaking abilities and strong leadership skills to advocate for policies that promote diversity and fight

	against all forms of discrimination. Her position in the social order places her as a beacon of hope and inspiration for marginalized communities, who see her as a symbol of change and progress. Driven by her passion for social justice, she tirelessly works towards dismantling barriers and creating a more equitable society.

Character	Eduardo Silva
Types	Global Unity Party
Stats and tags	Character: Politician
Narrative description	Eduardo Silva possesses an arresting presence that commands attention. With his tall stature, broad shoulders, and a strong jawline, he exudes confidence and strength. His warm brown eyes reflect his empathetic nature and his well-groomed beard adds a touch of sophistication to his appearance. Eduardo's charismatic personality and ability to connect with people from all walks of life make him an influential figure within The Global Unity Party. Born and raised in Brazil, Eduardo witnessed firsthand the social inequalities and discrimination prevalent in his country. This ignited his passion for human rights and justice. He pursued a career in law, specializing in human rights advocacy. Eduardo's formative years were marked by his dedication to fighting for the rights of marginalized communities and his involvement in grassroots movements. His training as a lawyer provided him with the necessary skills to navigate complex legal systems and effectively advocate for change. As the Deputy Leader and Policy Strategist of The Global Unity Party, Eduardo plays a pivotal role in shaping the party's policies. He brings his legal expertise and deep understanding of the challenges faced by marginalized communities to the forefront. Eduardo's life-changing experiences and his dedication to promoting diversity and combating discrimination drive him to work tirelessly towards creating a more inclusive society. He firmly believes in the power of alliances and collaboration, and his goal is to build strong coalitions that can effect meaningful change on a global scale.

Character	Mei Ling Chen
Types	Global Unity Party
Stats and tags	Character: Politician
Narrative description	Mei Ling Chen possesses an elegant and refined appearance that mirrors her composed and poised demeanor. With her sleek black hair, almond-shaped eyes, and a warm smile, she effortlessly draws people towards her. Mei Ling's fashion-forward sense of style reflects her multicultural background, blending elements of her Chinese heritage with the modern influences of her American upbringing. Her gentle yet authoritative voice carries a sense of conviction and determination. Born in Beijing and raised in San Francisco, Mei Ling grew up navigating the complexities of cultural diversity. Her early life experiences, coupled with her passion for social justice, led her to pursue a career in journalism. Mei Ling's formative years were marked by her dedication to highlighting stories of marginalized communities and amplifying voices that often went unheard. Her

	social relationships and exposure to diverse cultures shaped her understanding of the importance of representation and inclusion. As the Director of Communications for The Global Unity Party, Mei Ling harnesses her skills as a journalist to effectively communicate the party's message of fostering a diverse and inclusive society. She is driven by her belief in the power of media to shape narratives and influence public opinion. Mei Ling aims to ensure that the party's communication is accessible and inclusive, breaking down barriers and challenging stereotypes. Her current goals revolve around creating a more equitable media landscape and using storytelling as a tool for social change.

Character	Sarah Anderson
Types	Progressive Future Party
Stats and tags	Character: Politician
Narrative description	Sarah Johnson is a remarkable individual with vibrant red hair that stands out in any room. Her warm smile and empathetic eyes make her approachable to people from all walks of life. As the Equality and Inclusion Officer of The Progressive Future Party, Sarah is known for her unwavering commitment to creating a diverse and inclusive society. Her calm and composed disposition allows her to navigate complex discussions and foster collaboration between different stakeholders. In the social order, Sarah is respected for her advocacy work, and her position within the party gives her a platform to address systemic discrimination and promote equality. Born and raised in a small town, Sarah experienced firsthand the challenges faced by marginalized communities. Her upbringing instilled in her a deep sense of justice and a passion for social change. After completing a degree in sociology, Sarah actively engaged in civil rights activism, organizing protests and community outreach programs. These formative years shaped her understanding of the importance of inclusivity and motivated her to join The Progressive Future Party. In the present, Sarah continues to fight for equality and inclusion. Her goal is to ensure that every individual, regardless of their background, feels valued and included. Sarah believes in the power of collaboration and actively seeks to build alliances with community organizations, policymakers, and party members. Her main challenge lies in overcoming resistance and pushing for policy changes that address systemic biases. Sarah's desire is to create a society where discrimination is eradicated, and diversity is celebrated.

Character	Malik Patel
Types	Progressive Future Party
Stats and tags	Character: Politician
Narrative description	Malik Patel is a tall, charismatic figure with a warm smile that lights up a room. His expressive eyes and engaging presence make him an effective communicator. As the Diversity Outreach Coordinator of The Progressive Future Party, Malik is known for his ability to connect with people from diverse backgrounds. He believes in the power of unity and strives to bridge the gaps

	between communities. In the social order, Malik's role is to facilitate dialogue, organize events, and foster inclusivity within the party and society at large. Born and raised in a vibrant multicultural city, Malik grew up surrounded by different cultures and religions. This upbringing exposed him to the richness of diversity and the challenges faced by marginalized communities. Malik pursued a degree in social sciences and actively engaged in community organizing during his college years. These experiences deepened his understanding of the importance of inclusivity and equipped him with the skills to engage with diverse communities. In the present, Malik's primary goal is to build relationships with various communities and ensure their concerns are heard and addressed. He organizes community forums, listens to the unique needs of different groups, and actively incorporates their perspectives into party policies. Malik faces the challenge of breaking down barriers and fostering understanding among individuals with different backgrounds. His desire is to create a society where diversity is celebrated, and every individual feels a sense of belonging.

Character	Maya Thompson
Types	Progressive Future Party
Stats and tags	Character: Politician
Narrative description	Maya Thompson is a striking figure with a shaved head and bold tattoos that tell stories of resilience and empowerment. Her piercing gaze reflects determination and strength. As an Anti-Discrimination Advocate for The Progressive Future Party, Maya is known for her fierce dedication to fighting all forms of discrimination. Her assertive yet compassionate nature allows her to confront injustices head-on and advocate for the rights of marginalized communities. In the social order, Maya's position as an advocate places her at the forefront of the battle against systemic biases. Maya was born and raised in an underserved neighborhood, where she witnessed the impact of discrimination on her community. Her early experiences of prejudice and inequality ignited her passion for social justice. Maya pursued a degree in law and became involved in human rights organizations, fighting for the rights of marginalized individuals. These formative years exposed her to the intricacies of the legal system and further fueled her determination to combat discrimination. In the present, Maya's beliefs are rooted in the idea that access to equal opportunities should be available to all individuals, regardless of their background. Her primary goal is to raise awareness about discrimination, propose policy changes, and empower marginalized communities to fight for their rights. Maya faces challenges from entrenched systems of power and resistance to change. Her desire is to create a society where justice prevails, discrimination is eradicated, and all individuals can thrive without fear of prejudice.

Character	Justice Amelia Thompson
Types	Guardians of Justice

Stats and tags	Character: Justice
Narrative description	Justice Amelia Thompson is a striking figure with a commanding presence in the courtroom. Her piercing blue eyes and silver-streaked hair exude a sense of wisdom and authority. Notable for her sharp intellect and unwavering dedication to justice, Justice Thompson is known for her fair and impartial rulings. She possesses a calm and composed demeanor, allowing her to navigate even the most challenging legal cases with grace. As a respected Justice within the Autopian judicial system, she holds a high position in the social order, commanding the respect of her peers and the public alike. Justice Thompson's motivation stems from her unwavering belief in upholding the principles of a fair and inclusive democratic society, ensuring that all citizens are given equal rights and protection under the law. Born into a family of lawyers, Justice Thompson was instilled with a deep sense of justice from a young age. She pursued her legal education at a prestigious university, where she excelled academically. During her formative years, she observed the disparities and injustices prevalent in the society, which fueled her determination to make a difference. She forged strong relationships with mentors and colleagues who shaped her understanding of the law and the importance of maintaining a just society. Life-changing experiences, such as witnessing the consequences of systemic inequality, further solidified her commitment to becoming a guardian of justice. In the present, Justice Thompson continues to be a steadfast advocate for fairness and inclusivity. She faces the challenges of an ever-evolving legal landscape with unwavering resolve, ensuring that the laws of Autopia remain aligned with the principles of justice. Her goal is to create a society where all individuals, regardless of their background, have equal access to justice. Justice Thompson's desire is to leave a lasting impact on the legal system, setting a precedent for future generations of Justices and ensuring that the democratic values of Autopia endure.

Character	Justice Samuel Reynolds
Types	Guardians of Justice
Stats and tags	Character: Justice
Narrative description	Justice Samuel Reynolds possesses a dignified demeanor, with graying hair and a distinguished appearance that commands respect. Notable for his sharp intellect and vast knowledge of constitutional law, he serves as a guiding force within the Autopian judicial system. Justice Reynolds upholds the principles of justice with a firm hand, ensuring that the laws of Autopia are interpreted and applied in a manner that safeguards the rights and liberties of its citizens. His calm and measured approach instills confidence in those who appear before him, knowing that their cases will be evaluated with utmost care and impartiality. As a senior member of the Autopia Supreme Court, he holds a prominent position in the social order, influencing the course of justice within the nation. Born in the heart of Autopia, Justice Reynolds grew up in a family that valued the rule of law. His early exposure to discussions about justice and fairness sparked his interest in pursuing a legal career. He excelled academically,

	earning scholarships to prestigious law schools. During his formative years, he established meaningful connections with prominent legal scholars and mentors who shaped his understanding of constitutional principles and their application. Life-changing experiences, such as witnessing the impact of landmark legal cases, further solidified his commitment to upholding justice and maintaining the democratic values of Autopia. In the present, Justice Reynolds continues to be a staunch defender of the rule of law. He faces the challenges of interpreting complex legal issues with unwavering dedication, seeking to strike a balance between tradition and progress. His goal is to safeguard the democratic foundations of Autopia, ensuring that the rights and liberties of its citizens are protected. Justice Reynolds believes in the importance of maintaining the integrity of the legal system and fostering public trust in the judiciary. His motivation lies in preserving the principles of justice, leaving a lasting impact on the legal landscape of Autopia.

Character	Justice Gabriel Ramirez
Types	Guardians of Justice
Stats and tags	Character: Justice
Narrative description	Justice Gabriel Ramirez possesses a warm and approachable demeanor, with a strong build and a friendly smile that puts others at ease. Notable for his compassionate nature and dedication to restorative justice, he serves as a compassionate figure within the Autopian judicial system. Justice Ramirez believes in seeking alternative solutions and rehabilitation opportunities for non-violent offenders, aiming to address the root causes of criminal behavior rather than resorting to punitive measures. His empathetic approach and ability to connect with individuals from diverse backgrounds make him a respected and influential figure in the pursuit of justice. As a Justice overseeing lower-level courts, he plays a vital role in the social order, ensuring that fairness and inclusivity are upheld within the system. Born and raised in a bustling city within Autopia, Justice Ramirez grew up in a community marked by a rich cultural tapestry. His early exposure to the challenges faced by marginalized individuals sparked his desire to make a positive impact through the legal system. He pursued his legal education while actively engaging with grassroots organizations that focused on social justice issues. These experiences provided him with a unique perspective on the underlying factors contributing to criminal behavior and the potential for rehabilitation. Life-changing encounters with individuals who had successfully turned their lives around inspired his firm belief in the power of restorative justice. In the present, Justice Ramirez continues to be a dedicated advocate for restorative justice within the Autopian judicial system. He faces the challenges of a system that often prioritizes punitive measures with unwavering determination, striving to create a more compassionate and rehabilitative approach. Justice Ramirez believes in addressing the root causes of criminal behavior, working towards the reintegration of individuals into society rather than perpetuating a cycle of punishment. His goal is to promote healing and

	transformation, ensuring that non-violent offenders are given opportunities to rebuild their lives and contribute positively to the community.

Character	Adrian Reed
Types	The Advocate
Stats and tags	Character: Politician
Narrative description	Adrian is a striking figure, with a commanding presence that demands attention. Standing tall and possessing an air of confidence, their expressive eyes reveal a depth of empathy and compassion. Their distinguishing physical feature is a shock of silver hair that adds an aura of wisdom and maturity to their appearance. Adrian's warm smile and genuine warmth instantly put people at ease, creating an environment conducive to open dialogue and collaboration. Known for their exceptional oratory skills, they have a resonant voice that carries conviction and inspires others to action. Their notable traits include unwavering determination, a strong moral compass, and an unwavering commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Born and raised in Autopia, Adrian experienced firsthand the struggles faced by marginalized communities. Growing up in a diverse neighborhood, they witnessed firsthand the injustices and inequalities that plagued society. This early exposure to social disparities ignited a fire within them, fueling their drive to become a catalyst for change. Their parents, both activists, instilled in them a deep sense of social responsibility and the importance of fighting for justice. Guided by this upbringing, Adrian pursued higher education in political science and law, immersing themselves in studies that deepened their understanding of governance and social systems. Throughout their formative years, they actively engaged with grassroots organizations, honing their leadership skills and building connections with like-minded individuals. At present, Adrian is a respected and influential political leader, having risen to prominence through their unwavering commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Their core belief is that every individual, regardless of their background, should have equal access to opportunities and be treated with dignity and respect. They tirelessly advocate for policies that dismantle systemic barriers, striving to create a society where diversity is celebrated and everyone's voice is heard. Their goals include implementing comprehensive social reforms, fostering an inclusive culture, and ensuring that Autopia becomes a model nation for equity and justice. Adrian's motivations stem from their unwavering belief in the transformative power of unity and collaboration. They face challenges from opposition forces that resist change and defend the status quo, but their unwavering determination pushes them forward. Above all, Adrian desires to leave a lasting legacy of a society where all individuals can thrive and reach their full potential, irrespective of their differences.

Animals

Animal	Cere-Bull
Types	Dog, sensory safe
Stats and tags	Animal: Dog
Narrative description	A newer breed of dog specifically bred as support for neurodivergent individuals. They detect oncoming emotional distress from their partnered human and lead them away from certain stimuli. They are also strong and heavy enough to gently pin their owner to the ground, and lay on them to provide grounding. Their fur is extremely soft to help provide calming stimming. The Breed consists of Pitbull Terriers or Stafford Terriers and Great Pyrenees or Australian Shepards, and mixed mutts for genetic stability.

Animal	Muskox
Types	Ungulate
Stats and tags	Animal: Meat animal
Narrative description	A small ungulate that is becoming more popular for meat production than cows due to lower costs of raising, lower needs for space, lower environmental impact.

Groups

Group	Neurodivergent-Disabled Rights Movement
Types	Rebelion
Stats and tags	Group
Narrative description	The “branded” version of the rebellion that eventually went on to represent them in the federal government.

Group	The Vigilante Society (Vees)
Types	Rebelion
Stats and tags	Seattle Black Deck Riots, weapon smuggling, vigilante justice, social services, gang activity response Group
Narrative description	What started as a small group of friends doing community outreach services while cosplaying as superheroes around halloween turned into an international movement. People started recording themselves doing Parkour, working out like how comic book characters would, feeding the homeless and cleaning up parks dressed in hero costumes for clout. But more serious members started doing actual patrols around at-risk neighbourhoods for crime. Despite many

	getting hurt and a few even getting killed in action, the movement kept building in strength as crime rates started going down faster than police presence did. It came to a head however when a group of Vees came to blows with police officers over excessive force. Many Vees were present and active during the infamous Seattle Black Deck Riots. Eventually Vees started running underground training/weapon smuggling organisations and became the boots on the ground members of the Rebellion when things got at their worst.

Group	The Social Equity Party
Types	Government party
Stats and tags	since government inception, 100 members, parliament and party HQ(s) Dr. Emily Patel; Antonio Torres; Samantha 'Sam' Blake Group
Narrative description	This party is dedicated to creating a society where everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. They advocate for policies that address income inequality, tackle systemic discrimination, improve accessibility, foster diversity, and provide equal access to education and healthcare.

Group	The Global Unity Party
Types	government party
Stats and tags	since government inception, 100 members, parliament and party HQ(s) Dr. Amina Johnson; Eduardo Silva; Mai Ling Chen Group
Narrative description	This party believes in fostering a diverse and inclusive society where every individual feels valued and included, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. They advocate for policies that promote diversity and fight against all forms of discrimination.

Group	The Progressive Future Party
Types	government party
Stats and tags	since government inception, 100 members, parliament and party HQ(s) Sarah Anderson; Malik Patel; Maya Thompson Group
Narrative description	This party is focused on creating a future where everyone has an equal chance to thrive and that economic growth benefits everyone, not just the wealthy. They support a strong social safety net, universal basic income,

	progressive social and tax policies, a living wage, and strong worker protections to ensure that everyone shares in the prosperity.

Group	The Teachers Union
Types	Labour union
Stats and tags	500 members, Union HQ and schools Key members? ?? Group
Narrative description	

Group	School Board
Types	Education, government
Stats and tags	Board headquarters Group
Narrative description	

Interviews

Interview with Marie Morris - Founder of Tech Revive

Chad:

Hello Mrs Morris, you've agreed to share with me and my audience your experiences and what has led you to live in Autopia, including starting Tech Revive. Why don't you go ahead and tell me everything.

Marie Morris:

Thank you dear. Yes, my name is Marie Morris. However, Mrs Morris makes me feel so old. I barely feel a day over (can't give accurate age because I don't know when autopia was actually established). I moved to autopia when I was just a girl with my parents. We were being prosecuted in our home land for me being on the autism spectrum. My parents fled with me, both to protect myself and them, as they were already in trouble for "harboring" me as our old land put it. My parents had me diagnosed when I was quite young, officially when I was nine we got my diagnosis. At first my diagnosis was fine but when society started to outcast us, my parents valued my safety over any life they had built back home. Feels funny calling that place

home, when my home is here, and it always will be. I myself did not play a large part in the rebellion but I was here very early on, before we became the beautiful community you see today. We didn't have much when we moved but my parents got jobs quickly. My mother became a teacher at a local school house near us, and my father quickly took a job in construction. I spent a lot of my young days with my mother in the school house. My parents used to always say I did so well in school, too bad that is the main reason we had to move here. Oh that sounds wrong, I really do love it here. You must know it's just hard to explain sometimes. Being prosecuted from something out of your control that you never asked for. Anyway where were we? Ah yes, I spent most days with my mother and continued my own education. Technology and science spoke to me in a way I never expected. I remember hearing constantly about the e-waste crisis the world was in, piles of discarded tech poisoning entire counties, all while these big countries sit back and add to it. I couldn't let it continue, I didn't want to see it happen here, to my home. So I took matters into my own hands. I teamed up with my good friend Harden Gloven, and together we created Tech Revive. It was a small and slow start. I had the technical knowhow to repurpose the waste but wasn't able to protect myself from it. Harden is a wiz at that kind of stuff, he has his own business that we pair up with to supply us

with all the latest and greatest protection. Together we have been able to outfit the entire factor, all 3,000 workers, even those that don't work directly with the waste for safety. We have multiple contracts with many countries to send us their e-waste, for a small fee, and we additionally sell the tech created back to those countries. The name of the company, Revive Tech, was inspired by my move here. My sense of hope and my personality were revived when I was able to live here, with people like me. No longer afraid of prosecution. Taking something everyone deems dangerous and turning it into something great, useful and enjoyable.

Interview with Tyler Mowbray - Founder of Bot-anic

Chad:

Hello Mr Mowbray, you've agreed to share with me and my audience your experiences and what has led you to live in Autopia, including starting Bot-anic. Why don't you go ahead and tell me everything.

Tyler Mowbray:

Please, call me Tyler. I'm sure you'll have many interviews of people talking about their lives before coming to Autopia but I was born and raised. My mom and dad moved here not long after they found out about this place. My mom is diagnosed autistic and my dad is diagnosed with ADHD. I'm also autistic like my mother, but I'm a carbon copy of my dad, looks wise and I have his ADHD. It was great growing up here. The adaptive teaching style, the career shadowing program, and having people that truly understand the struggles of not being able to express something. I remember when I was little my mom would take me into the garden with her and try her hardest to get me to help her plant, maintain and harvest the flowers and vegetables. However, I was much more interested in taking things apart and putting them back together. You should have seen her face when I took apart the sprinkler. She never really did try to stop me though. She used to go down to garage sales and thrift stores, finding old and broken things for me to rebuild. My dad taught me most of what I know, he got his degree in

engineering and when I wasn't attached to my moms hip, I was on his. He encouraged me to try and turn my "tinkering" into a job. He helped me build up the Bot-anic company. I wanted to build something that could help my mom continue gardening as she got older. It was also a great help for the agriculture here, as my inventions will let us grow more food faster than before. I started with just making small bots for my mom, mostly to just remind her when a plant needed to be picked and when to water them, but it grew from there into the bots you can find at almost any home in this community.
Interviewer:
An neurotypical outsider interviewer who is a curious journalist.
White, cis-het, male who is clueless about other ways of being.

Chad: Okay, I think I have this set up right. It should be recording.

Charlotte: Well I'm streaming this too, so if your recording goes wrong you can always pull from my VOD.

Chad: I should mention for the audio transcript, this interview is taking place over VRChat and my guest here has the avatar of a black and white and blue wolf woman.

Charlotte: Hey, it's my fursona! More people would recognize me like this than in person, basically! You should see how people come up to me when I'm wearing my fursuit. [laughs]

Chad: Wait, you have a costume like this in real life? Wow.

Charlotte: Yeah, not cheap too. Cost like $4000! Worth it for all the hugs I get at meet ups and cons though.

Chad: Oh holy- Er, we should probably get back on topic. How about you introduce yourself?

Charlotte: Alrighty! My name is Charlotte Madison, but most of you would know me by my online handle; StaticFluffle! I'm a game dev best known for my indie title; *Starlight Estuary.* I am a trans woman and I've supported a lot of trans youth and disabled rights organisations over the years. Earlier this year, me and some friends had a massive 24 stream fundraiser and we raised over $10,000 for The Trevor Project and a few other organisations.

So, today I will be telling my story from the infamous Seattle "Black Deck" Riots. At least what I was able to witness from my hotel room and heard from friends who were in the thick of it. It was pretty damn crazy, even just on the sidelines.

Chad: Why do they call them the "Black Deck" Riots anyway?

Charlotte: Right that's a good place to start I guess. How much do you know about the *Vigilante Society* and the NDRM?

Chad: I actually have another interview lined up with one of the people who claims to have helped start the Vees later on. I know they basically became partners at some point in their history.

Charlotte: Okay good, I'll get to that in a bit then. So, we were in Seattle for a convention that weekend; Rainy Day Con. It was, you know, typical games, anime, furry, all that nerd stuff type of Con. It was me, my then-fiancee-now-wife, and eight or nine other people splitting a suite together.

Chad: Wow that's a lot of people for just one room. Must have been a big suite.

Charlotte: It was only like two double beds and a couch, but that's pretty normal for regular con-goers. You'd be surprised just how many people you can fit into a single room when you're expecting to either be on the convention floor or partying and passing out wherever you can fit. I remember a good few times I actually slept in a bathtub, but that's a different story entirely.

But when you spend almost the entire weekend basically barricaded in a small room, and you can hear screaming just outside your door and see people fighting in the streets below your window. God, it was like something out of a disaster movie...

My wife and I showed up on the Friday afternoon. Fridays are usually pretty dead when it comes to events just because most people are still just lining up to get their badges and vendors are still setting up their booths and stuff. But we came early because my wife is physically disabled, she has a hard time getting around so the extra time was good for us to map the layout of events and plan things out.

We met up with a couple of friends we were rooming with, got our badges and hit up a couple of the smaller events going on; you know, panels, screenings, walked around artist alley for a bit before heading back to the room around, I want to say, nine at night.

Now, pretty early the next day, it's like around 10am, me and my wife were getting ready to leave and we're like the last ones in the room. Then one of my friends who left before us starts blowing up my phone. He sends me stuff like "*Whatever you do, don't leave your room, and if you do absolutely have to leave, don't go out wearing your costume!*" which was really weird since it was my first year actually with a suit and he was begging me to show off just earlier that day. Then he sends me pictures from the game room and practically every table was covered in Magic The Gathering and it was *all* Red and Black themed decks. Which is already really creepy even if you don't know what's going on, but a *massive* red flag if you do.

Chad: Oh, so that's where the deck stuff comes from?

Charlotte: Yup. So I don't know who had it first, the NDRM or Vees, but there's this code they had that used the Magic cards to communicate in the open like at game cafes and stuff 'cuz that's just what they did. The colour of the deck a person was using conveyed the topic they

were discussing. Red decks, I think, meant that they needed in-person action as opposed to online stuff. But Black decks, eugh! They meant violence was being planned.

The friend who was messaging me from the game room was sort of friend-of-a-friend with a Vee so he knew what was going on and he knew it would have been too hard for me and my fiancee to get out of town before stuff happened.

Chad: So, what, this was just a random attack on the city to send a message?

Charlotte: Oh god no! Outside of most sport celebrations that get out of hand, riots don't happen for no reason, kiddo. Remember, the first Pride Parade was freaking Stonewall.

No, what happened was someone who was working at the hotel that was hosting Rainy Day Con found out that there also was this big conference going on between defence company bigwigs. I'm talking Lockheed-Martin, Boeing, GD, all the big weapon developer-types.

Now, this was right after Korea's big uprising and China was starting to fall apart like it was back to *Romance of the Three Kingdom* times. Their international contracts were going to shit and they were worried that the United States was going to become a lot less united too. Not because they were patriotic, mind, but cuz they weren't sure how they were going to divvy up the country between themselves. Who do they sell to without stepping on each others toes and all. Hell, they were looking forward to a civil war because that meant business would pick up. That was what the conference that weekend was all about.

Chad: Oh... Oh wow. Is that seriously how those kinds of companies worked?

Charlotte: Yup, there's a reason they're called Merchants of Death. And what sucks too was that they were in *deep* in pretty much every engineering school in the country. Like their board of directors was either made up of executives from those companies, or someone in their pocket. So if you wanted to be an engineer and make stuff, pretty much the only internship or co-op you could get would be for weapons stuff. What sucks too is that in those schools, they put a lot of emphasis on accountability and ethics, hell some schools give you a ring made from a bridge that collapsed and killed a bunch of people to remind you that lives are in your hands in this industry... and then you don't know if the engine you designed is going into a washing machine or a machine gun.

So yeah, people got kinda mad.

Imagine those executives' faces when thirty or forty people in full fursuits and various cosplays basically stormed the halls outside of their meeting rooms. And those rooms have glass walls to them too, so they could see everything.

At first it was just an innocuous prank, basically. They were dancing, shouting nonsense, blasting music in the halls. But turns out, that was acting as a distraction. Cuz while all that was going on, dozens of people went to their hotel rooms and, well, you know how insecure hotel wifi is? They were [expletive]-Oh, sorry I really shouldn't swear-but they were messing with

those executives' phones and laptops and whatever tech they brought with them to that meeting.

And the stuff they got off of them before getting discovered was **bad**. Blackmailing members of the Supreme Court, dealings with terrorist groups, plotting insurrections in foreign powers to keep control over mines and keep conflicts going. I swear to god, it was like something out of a Metal Gear game but without the sexy ninja cyborgs... I wish there were sexy ninja cyborgs.

Chad: Holy [expletive]!

Charlotte: No joke.

Chad: But how were they able- I mean, they're just, what did you call them? Furries? How the hell did they manage to do all that?!

Charlotte: You might be a bit surprised to learn this, but a not-insignificant population of the Furry community are actually in STEM, that's Science, Tech, Engineering and Math. And an equally not-insignificant portion of said STEM Furries were sick of getting screwed over by their stranglehold on the industry. Hell, I found out later that one of the biggest ringleaders for the effort was actually an ex-Lockheed Martin employee. So in the weirdest of ways, Furries were the perfect people to take them down.

Eventually, the breach was noticed by the execs and their teams cuz of course, they were in the business of defence after all, and [expletive] officially hit the fan afterwards. Not only did they call the police, but they had the National Guard on speed dial, not to mention they basically had their own private armies worth of security personnel.

Now, everyone who went to mess with them in person was smart enough to do so in full costume so it was harder to identify them. Hard to get an ID on someone with a giant foam dragon head on. Unfortunately that just meant their thugs were sent out to shake down and harass practically everyone in cosplay at a freaking convention. Hence why my friend told me to stow my fursuit away.

The entire convention centre went on lockdown. Cops started pounding on individual hotel room doors, trying to find the main group of hackers that were leaking the files they stole. They started dragging people out into the hallways and lobbies, like... it was freaking terrifying.

Things only got worse when someone got killed. Some bodyguard or whatever tackled someone wrong, broke his neck. He wasn't even really part of the group messing with the weapons dealers. Just... wrong place, wrong time.

The entire convention centre went off like a powder keg after that.

All this happened within like an hour, so there wasn't any time between me wondering if my friend was just messing with me, giving me that warning with the cards, to it looking like freaking 'Nam outside.

I tried to get my wife out of the hotel entirely, but they shut down the elevators and she's wheelchair bound. So what we wound up doing instead was hide in our hotel room, both of us glued to our phones so we could find where everyone was. She was next to the window looking down to the road out in front of the hotel and watched as crowds of people actually charged **towards** the main lobby doors because like a Vee or someone had called in backup. All they were doing was making it harder for people who didn't want to get caught up in the middle of the riot to get away.

We managed to wrangle most of our friends back to the room before we barricaded it. Thank god we had the sense to grab groceries on our way in so we didn't get screwed by overpriced con food booths. But...

Couple of my friends wound up joining the riot. I don't know if they believed in the cause or... whatever.

I... *had* this online friend I was planning on meeting for the first time in person that day. They went by 3ndL3ss. They were pretty private, but I'd still say we were pretty close. I knew they were... They weren't in a good way, in real life. They struggled with their health and depression. They weren't one of those big tech Furries that were leading the charge that weekend, they were actually a porn artist. They said it was the only way they could support themself financially, but censorship restrictions were making it harder and harder to do that. And...

I was trying to message them, get them to hide in our room with us. All I get back is a message that says "I am finally going to do something that actually matters". And...

And I never heard from them again.

[She pauses, her voice is breaking with trying not to cry.]

Eventually... We were able to get out of the hotel lockdown, my wife claimed she was having a medical emergency cuz... cuz nobody would stop a woman in a wheelchair, right? Heh. Met back up with some of my friends who joined in the riots at the hospital. One of them wound up breaking their wrist in what basically boiled down to being a mosh pit.

Chad: So... Do you resent the people who started that whole thing? The ones who hacked into those weapons dealers' computers?

Charlotte: It's... My feelings on that whole event are pretty complicated. Even knowing what I know now, looking back on it. Hell, if Black Deck didn't happen and put those shady dealings into the spotlight, would we have been pushed into a civil war that killed way more people? But... That's only looking at those deaths as statistics. Not even ten people died in Seattle, but every one of those people had... friends, family. Even if they were willing to die for whatever cause—and I can *guarantee* you not all of them were—they still left people behind that loved them and miss them to this day.

3ndL3ss... I don’t know if you died that day or if you just got arrested, but if you can hear this… Please know, you always did things that mattered. You mattered to me just as you were. I wish you could have been there for my wedding.

Chad: Okay, hopefully THIS time the recording will actually work. So, I am joined here today, once again in VR, by someone claiming to be one of the founders of the Vigilante Society as it is today, but he has refused to give me his real name.

Steadfast: Alright listen, when this whole thing started I was just a teenager. I’m married with kids now, and I do not want someone coming to me in my personal life over something that someone else wearing a V on their shoulder did to a cop or whatever. Nobody expected this organisation to actually *be* an organisation with leadership and authority when we started.

Chad: Alright, that’s... fair actually. How do you want to introduce yourself?

Steadfast: Hello everyone, I am Steadfast. I am a senior member of the Vees and while not in active duty, I still support the foundation with advice, training and vetting new members in my area. Nice to meet you all.

I would like to preface all of this by saying I would rather it be Stalwart himself giving this interview because it really is his story. One of the biggest issues that the disabled community, or rather any marginalised community, is that they have been denied self-advocacy. If it was not for the fact that the one week that you said you were available for this project was when Stal was in the hospital for surgery, he would be the one telling you his story. But he has given me his explicit permission to give my bit of the experience with you, so, here we are.

But the biggest help you can give to the disabled, queer, whatever community you aren’t a part of that is struggling, is listening to what they want and need rather than speaking for them.

Chad: So you said that nobody expected things to snowball into this. How exactly did the Vigilante Society start? What *did* you expect it to be?

Steadfast: Well first of all, it wasn’t my idea to begin with. It was my friend Stalwart’s. We grew up together practically since we were in diapers. He is the best friend anyone could ask for. In fact he is... Well, I mentioned I have a wife and kids, but we’re actually part of a polycule together, with him being a queer-platonic partner.

Chad: Queer-Poly-What?

Steadfast: Okay, what a queer-platonic partner is is basically a super-best-friend you can’t imagine yourself without. You trust them with your life, your bank account, everything. But at the same time you don’t want to kiss them or have sex with.

Stalwart lives with us, he's helped raise our kids because they're his kids too, even if he didn't help make them.

A polycule just means an intimate relationship with more than two people in it. All consenting, all equal. This isn't like the Archie-Betty-Veronica love triangle [expletive]... Although, that problem really could have been made a lot easier with a polycule! Hahaha

Chad: I guess I really need to look into the relationship with neurodivergence and queer identity, cuz another person I was interviewing alluded to the correlation between being trans and neurodivergent and a furry.

Steadfast: Hahaha yeah that's a bit of a rabbit hole, but they're not wrong, that stuff is very connected. Anyway.

Stalwart's special interest has always been superheroes; you know, Avengers, Justice League, Transformers and stuff, and he would take their messages to heart, unironically. Especially when it came to helping others.

It wasn't that he was confusing the fictional world for reality or anything. It was more like he...

Okay, think of it like this; a lot of comparisons have been made between Superman, Hercules and even Jesus, weirdly enough. Whatever your spiritual or religious leaning is, you are building a moral code based off of stories passed down person to person in order to teach you what's right and wrong or what you should aspire to be like right? Now, the stories that they tell are probably a good few degrees off of reality; someone holding a mountain on their back, giving a blind person their sight back, whatever, but hyperbole helps to get the message across. The message being "use whatever power you have to help those around you. Even if it's hard to do, even if it hurts, help them be happy."

But in his mind he still needed some kind of power to help people. Since we were fresh out of super powers, he went with the next best thing and went into gymnastics to try and be like Nightwing or the Ninja Turtles-

Reporter: Nightwing?

Steadfast: Dick Grayson, yknow, original Robin? Batman character.

Anyway. Yeah, took gymnastics, first aid, did scouts for a while, but wouldn't take anything like karate because he didn't have a violent bone in him.

Looking back on it, it's pretty obvious he was autistic, you know? I mean he was the type that would wear something with like a superman logo or whatever every single day.

Thankfully, while we lived in a pretty decent sized town, the grade school we went to was actually pretty small. It was "everyone knew everyone" kind of size, so by the time he actually got diagnosed, everyone just shrugged it off as *just how he was*.

Things took a bit of a turn when we started going to high school, though. It was a much larger school, further from our home neighbourhood so there were a lot more new people that weren't used to his *quirks*.

And let's be real here; puberty makes assholes of us all. If anyone was even a little bit weird, it was like sharks smelling blood in the water, so... Stalwart was starting to have a bit of a time. But he never let it show.

What didn't help was that the first chance he got, he went into the "Fasion and Textile Development" elective course we had at school. It was basically like Home Ec, but focused on sewing instead of food. And, yknow, a not-traditionally-masculine guy going into a class like that was just adding fuel to the bullying fire. Which was bullshit since we both learned how to sew back in BOY scouts but... whatever.

Anyway, it's about a week before Halloween, and he is just so excited to show off the costume that he made in class. So he suggests we do some "reverse Trick-or-Treating" by putting together all our leftovers from Thanksgiving, and hand out meals for the homeless people around. Cuz our city has always had a bad homelessness problem cuz of shitty landlords grabbing up everything and... I'm getting ahead of myself.

So yeah, we pack up a good two, maybe three dozen meals worth of turkey and potatoes and whatever into some cheap takeout containers we got at a bulk store.

And Stalwart shows all of us up. Like, you ever seen the movie *Kickass*? It was basically like that. He was decked out in homemade body armour, it's sleek, he even has one of those hard plastic-shell backpacks filled with first aid and other supplies. And the rest of us are just standing there in our cheap-ass dollar story costumes feeling like idiots! One of our friends was there in a rainbow unicorn Kigu and a ski-mask like the world's worst bank robber! It was great!

We actually wind up having a pretty great time. A bunch of people actually stopped us to take a picture with Stal, and he *never* broke character. He was all *"At ease, citizen! Have no fear, Stalwart can handle any problem!"* it was awesome.

But, obviously, we ran out of food to give out long before we stopped running into people who needed it. So we decided to make it a semi-regular thing. Stal offered to start making all of us costumes, and I'm a big enough man to admit I got giddy like a school girl at the idea of designing one for myself.

Another friend of ours who started going by Potluck, she and her mom had gotten into extreme couponing. They had spent some time in some financial trouble, she had three siblings and her dad wasn't in the picture anymore, so it was how they made ends meet. Things got better when her mom remarried, but they never got out of that habit, which was good for us. They could turn whatever money a couple of high schoolers could scrape together into like $200 worth of groceries, easy.

But I think when our "movement"- I'm still hesitant to call it that even after everything- when it really took off, was one night it was just me and him. It was after I got my costume and was officially debuted as Steadfast. We were doing our regular "patrol" around one of the worse-off

neighbourhoods. We had just handed off some sandwiches and dog food to this nice older gentlemen that was between shelters at the time. We're barely a block away when we hear his dog barking, we turn, and we see him getting harassed by some beat-cop with nothing better to do than tell someone to get off a public bench.

Without missing a beat, Stal walks up to the cop and in his hero voice goes *"Now that's not very helpful, officer."*

And the cop turns to us and sees two teenage idiots standing there in homemade riot gear basically and masks on and thinks we're there to start trouble. He leans into his walkie and reaches for his baton as he comes towards us.

And we just BOOK IT. Stal didn't look it at the time, but he could run like a [expletive]. We split up, I take a couple of corners to lose the police and wait about fifteen minutes before coming out of hiding. And then Stal just DROPS down in front of me from like a fire escape.

Turns out, he climbed up a three story building to the roof and just watched the cop go around the street trying to find him the whole time!

Someone saw that from their bedroom window, recorded and posted it; "real life superhero parkours away from the Popo!" It was amazing. He looked like a spider-monkey in sports padding.

That shit went kind of viral, like maybe 20,000 views on youtube in a month.

Another in our friend group saw that it was doing numbers, so he said "why don't we start making money off of our own deeds?" so we started our own channel. We posted highlights from our "patrols", handing out donations to people on the street or shelters, or Stal showing off parkour tricks. Whatever money we made from the channel got funnelled back into our donation funds managed by Potluck.

And Hell, we had to do community service hours to graduate from school anyway, so why not do it as superheroes? Cleaning up parks, teaching little kids how to ride a bike, serving at a soup kitchen. It just hit different when you were "in uniform". People took a lot of notice too.

Then a bunch of copycats started doing the same thing! I guess it helped motivate people to do charity work so long as they got to do it in costumes and post about it. It wasn't all great, a lot of people were doing it for clout, obviously. And some people were using as an excuse to mess with cops while wearing masks.

We started getting messages from those copycats, asking how to do what we do, how to never break character, why we did all that stuff. Stal just answered honestly and said *"Be the hero you wish you had protecting you at your worst time. Nothing will change if we don't bring a little bit of crazy into reality."*

Then we started posting how-to videos in character on basic first aid, parkour, partnerships with different charities.

...It wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows though...

We did get hurt from time to time, Stal most of all.

Stal just could not help himself when it comes to doing the right thing. As a younger kid, that made him a bit of a tattle-tail you know? But now that we were suited up as heroes, that meant stepping into some pretty dumb situations. Trying to use his hero-voice to get someone to stop tagging a wall, or stop fighting rarely ended well. Hell, there was this small-time gang in town that loved to track us down, like they wanted to play as our super villains or something.

The rest of us in this weird little pseudo-justice league we had started falling off of actually going out to do work after the first time they got scared by a hysterical homeless person or a feral dog. So that just left Stal to do what he did alone more and more, because he refused to stop. This was how he felt he was making an impact on the world.

He got beat up, a lot. Couple of times he even got stabbed. He is still paying for the injuries he got during this period. The surgery he’s getting this week is actually to try and correct an issue he has in his spine from someone pushing him down a flight of stairs.

I think, whenever he was posting from the hospital, telling the rest of the world not to give up on being a hero even if it was hard, that was what made the Vees a real... THING. That’s what separated the clout-chases from the real heroes. It showed that it wasn’t just some fad he was chasing for likes. He really did want to help, and he was looking for like-minded people.

Chad: Holy shit. He got stabbed and he still didn’t stop. How did his parents take it?

Steadfast: That’s... a whole other story. I’m sure he would be more than happy to tell it to you himself, but I don’t feel comfortable telling it myself.

Chad: But still, this is amazing. But if this started as just a bunch of people doing charity work in costume, how did it develop into something with membership and chain of command?

Steadfast: The weird thing about that is that is started with something called Q-Anon. And if you ever heard of that before, you probably know that’s a bad sign.

Chad: Uh I don’t actually.

Steadfast: Okay so back in the day Q-Anon was one of *those* places on the internet. Like 4chan and the darker parts of Reddit. It was the more cesspool-y parts where conspiracy theorists and domestic terrorists seethed together.

This was around that “Min-Maxing” started-

Chad: Mind explaining what that one is?

Steadfast: Oh, right. Well it was a government project called something else like “Early Step Ahead” or something, but we all called it Min-Maxing cuz that’s what it boiled down to. Basically what it was, was a new type of yearly testing for students starting from an early age to see where their strengths lie academically and also to diagnose any potential learning disabilities in a student.

On paper, that seemed like a great idea, but in reality it started funnelling students into almost like a caste-system from an early age. It disproportionately lead kids who tested positive for neurodivergence into computer-science-heavy programs. And it started being like if you were in one of those classes, people immediately knew you were... a “short-bus kid”.

Hell, we were in High School when that program was first implemented and they tried to say that Stal couldn’t be in the fashion classes anymore and he had to go into computers and financing classes. He fought like hell against it of course and by that point we were just a year off of graduating, so the teachers didn’t care enough to make a big stink about it.

But around that time, there were still protests about how unfairly the program was labelling kids into what classes they could and couldn’t take. And it was easy for anyone to see who it was a direct response to what happened with China and Russia around the same time.

If you’re in those programs and you get bullied for being a short-bus kid, then the teachers suggest to the parents that the student continue classes from home instead of them actually solving the bullying problem. Then the kids get a better chance at scholarships for those computer science degrees, and are socially inept enough to be considered “disabled enough” that government-run co-op housing to be appealing. They work from that government-monitored house, doing government cyber security, so that we don’t have what happened to NK happen to us.

So, there were some protests, some riots, people who followed “The Vees” ideology at least online started posting about how to safely protest and talk about when weapons would actually be acceptable for self defence and stuff.

Q-Anon heard “government subterfuge” and tried to invade the same online spaces that Vees were starting to build. They were asking about “when we were planning to take down the government” and whatever, and that wasn’t what we were about. Stal outright posted a callout for those bastards, and it forced him to officially put together a list of tenants for what Vees stood for, just so we could say that the ones trying to... Put together pipe bombs and whatever weren’t with us!

It probably came to a head with the... Well we know it as the Q-Anon Riots, but the general public knows it better as the incident around the Irish Reunification Conference...

They claimed to be Vigilantes, but they weren’t. Enough crazy bastards were able to get together, get their hands on makeshift weapons and hold British Parliament hostage for two days. A lot of people got hurt...

But in a weird way, Vees trying to push back against the image that Q-Anon was trying to give us probably lead to a lot more proactive members. They saw that large numbers could do for

the “super villains” of the world, so they got inspired to see how many people they could get together to do the right thing instead.

And, again, this was all out of our hands by this point. I was in college, I had barely touched my costume in months at this point and Stal was dealing with... Some serious stuff in his personal life. But even so, the list of core beliefs that he laid out became the tenants that the rest of the community ran with to this day, and you’ve seen what people have done with it;

Vees were on the ground during the Black Deck Riots providing first aid, Operation Brain in a Jar is still probably the biggest claim to fame we have.

I can’t really take credit for any of this, but... I don’t know. I’m still happy to be a part of this collective for good. Especially since I got to do it with my friends at the start.

Chad: Well thank you for sharing your story with me. I hope Stalwart feels better and we can reschedule an interview for another date, because I’m really interested in hearing what he has to say.

Jonathan: how do you practice Indigenous Spirituality and knowledge

Indigenous Knowledge Keeper: I practice Indigenous spirituality just by educating the next seven generations about tobacco, smudging, tipi protocols and how to give thanks to the plants, food, their friends, trees, and the Natural enivronment around them. I am also a Firekeeper as well in teaching everybody in how to keep the fire at ceremony and teaching young settlers how to participate in ceremony the proper way.

How do you teach the seven generations their culture and how to give back and contribute to the Anishaabe and Mohawk communities?

Knowledge Keeper: often the young generations often struggle with their cultural identity since intergenerational trauma and residential/day school took away their parents and grandparents language and culture since they were forced to conform to Western norms of reading, writing and math. Also their diet is affected as well - they are most likely to get heart disease and diabetes since there’s no access to grocery stores in the communities that they live in and their only access to food is the chips, bread and pop which is not enough to sustain themselves for a generation. This is not the way that we need to live. On top of the Western education system, they need to be taught drumming, how to partake in a sunrise ceremony, teach themselves the language, how to sustain themselves through growing their own food, how to be resilent in times of the climate crisis, and how to protect the natural world.

Jonathan: are the seven generations committing themselves to going to post-secondary education and are educators preparing them enough for the challenges of university and Indigenous institutes

Knowledge Keepers: teachers are really innovating with younger generations on that realm and changing the game on preparing Anishaabe and Mohawk people for higher education. They are targeting them for the university pathway earlier in grade nine after seeing their potential to lead in a decolonized world and seeing their resilience and bravery - the new reality of every Indigenous student going to university and Indigenous institution has just been made stronger because of the new destreaming policy. Years ago teachers would just place them in an apprenticeship and college pathway and called them names like useless and not making for cut for university which led to higher levels of suicidity, self harm, cutting themselves, anxiety and depression, and cultural loss and make them less likely to believe in themselves and most likely to have muitiple children in overcrowded housing and to live in poverty. Now teachers are encouraging First Nations people to find their own voices through writing about their personal experiences and future leadership aspirations in reflection papers, going to their own communities to partake in events and on the land excerises that allow them to be immersed and bringing in guest speaker. They are also learning about the implications of artificial intelligence and are developing skills like how to write a paper properly in their own words, expressing themselves, how to and self-confidence

Interview with Harden Gloven - Head of Revive Tech Safety and PPE production

Chad:

Hello Mr Gloven, you've agreed to share with me and my audience your experiences and what has led you to live in Autopia, including the construction of all PPE used in the Revive Tech company. Why don’t you go ahead and tell me everything.

Harden Gloven:

My name is Harden Gloven, as you’ve said already. I made the decision to immigrate to this country with my family about twelve years ago in search of better opportunities and a brighter future, as well as for my own and my family's safety. In my home country, economic instability and limited job prospects make it challenging to envision a prosperous life for us. We took a leap of faith and decided to start anew in a place where we believed we could build a better life for ourselves and our children. My husband is neurotypical but our children both have disabilities. Upon arriving here, I encountered a diverse and vibrant community that welcomed us with open arms. However, the initial transition was not without its challenges. Adapting to a new culture, navigating unfamiliar systems, and learning a new language presented hurdles that required perseverance and resilience. With the country still being fairly new in the world, there were many new challenges awaiting us but thankfully we all had eachother and made friends in this community quite quickly. Despite these challenges, the support we received from fellow immigrants and community organizations helped us integrate and thrive in our new environment. As I settled into life here, I became increasingly aware of the environmental issues facing our planet, particularly the growing problem of electronic waste. Witnessing the impact of irresponsible disposal practices and the hazardous working conditions faced by recycling workers, I felt compelled to take action. I knew that the e-waste recycling was profitable for our home in Autopia, especially with exporting the newly created tech, but I hated the danger our own people, some as young as sixteen, were facing. Drawing upon my background in engineering and a passion for environmental sustainability, I embarked on a mission to develop protective equipment specifically tailored to the needs of e-waste recyclers. The decision to

focus on protective equipment for recycling e-waste was driven by both personal and professional motivations. On a personal level, I wanted to contribute meaningfully to addressing environmental challenges while also improving the safety and well-being of workers in the recycling industry. Professionally, I saw an opportunity to apply my skills and expertise to create innovative solutions that could make a tangible difference in people's lives. My partner Marie Morris, whom I believe you have also interviewed, encouraged me to continue making more and new versions of the PPE with more sophisticated tech and AI, which is why I had my husband help me program HUDson. He came up with the name not me, and I didnt have the heart to tell him no. My experience here has been a journey of growth, learning, and resilience. I have had the privilege of working alongside inspiring individuals who share my passion for sustainability and social impact, like Marie. Together, we have overcome obstacles, celebrated successes, and forged meaningful connections within the community. The opportunity to pursue my entrepreneurial aspirations while making a positive impact on the environment has been incredibly fulfilling and rewarding. Additionally, I have found that myself and my children have started to thrive surrounded by individuals that understand our thoughts and feelings, plus they don’t shy away from our “quirks” as my husband would say. As for the possibility of moving back to my home country, it's a question that I often ponder. While I cherish the memories and cultural heritage of my homeland, I have also built a life here filled with opportunities and possibilities. The decision to return would not be taken lightly and would depend on various factors, including economic stability, family considerations, and where I believe I can continue to make a meaningful contribution to society. Not to mention, with how a large majority of the outside world feels about autistic and disabled individuals, I would need to see some significant change and protection to feel confident in moving back and especially taking my children back. For now, I am grateful for the opportunities afforded to me in this country and remain committed to creating positive change wherever life may take me.