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'This gives order and peace': the needs of autistic female students during mainstream secondary education in the Netherlands

Fernanda Esqueda Villegas, Steffie van der Steen and Alexander Minnaert

Department of Inclusive and Special Needs Education, Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Mainstream schools can be a major stressor for autistic students. Unintentionally, in this environment, their needs are often under-identified, overlooked, or dismissed. This is particularly the case for autistic females, whose difficulties can be less apparent for teachers. Few studies, however, have focused on the experiences of autistic female students in secondary education. Therefore, this study aimed to examine possible need-profiles for current and former autistic female students (aged 16–25) focusing on their experiences in secondary education in the Netherlands ($N = 38$). Using Q-methodology, we identified four distinct groups. One group preferred learning independently and required a structured environment in which detailed instructions were given. Another group wanted to build friendships to feel safe and have a better time at school. A third group expressed the need for teacher guidance to make the most of their learning process. The fourth group appreciated being treated like everyone else while also having their autism acknowledged. Our findings show that the most pressing needs of former and current autistic female students during secondary education relate to the social part of attending school. We advise teachers to pay close attention to these social needs if they want to provide an inclusive school environment.

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1. Introduction

Global initiatives over the past decades have worked towards creating schools that are welcoming and accepting of *all* learners (UNESCO (1990, 1994, 2015). Consequently, more autistic students have been enrolled in mainstream education (Fleury et al. 2014; Ravet 2011; Soto-Chodiman et al. 2012). Yet, the school environment is considered one of the main stressors and challenges in the lives of autistic students and their families (Cridland et al. 2014; Tesfaye et al. 2023). For instance, many autistic people experience sensory oversensitivity (Narzisi et al. 2025), making large, chaotic, and noisy environments (such as schools) particularly

CONTACT Fernanda Esqueda Villegas m.f.esqueda.villegas@rug.nl; fernanda.esqueda@uni.lu
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overwhelming and discomforting (Croydon et al. 2019; Goodall 2018). Research further indicates that such settings can hinder autistic students' ability to concentrate and engage with lessons (Humphrey and Lewis 2008; Saggers, Hwang, and Louise Mercer 2011). Therefore, ensuring access to quiet spaces where autistic students can withdraw from sensory overstimulation can be critical for creating autism-friendly environments that support their inclusion and well-being in educational settings (Aubineau and Blicharska 2020; Brede et al. 2017; Lebenhagen and Dynia 2024).

Notably, enhancing the inclusion of autistic learners requires more than adapting the physical environment; it also involves careful consideration of the social supports available to them (Esqueda Villegas, Van der Steen, and Minnaert 2024). In this sense, an understanding and responsive school environment that meets the specific needs of autistic students is essential (Anderson et al. 2024), particularly since many autistic learners perceive themselves as negatively different from their classmates (Williams, Gleeson, and Jones 2019). The literature, however, has consistently highlighted that mainstream schools (unintentionally) tend to under-identify, overlook, or dismiss the needs of autistic students (Baldwin and Costley 2016; Brede et al. 2017). Therefore, many of their educational experiences are associated with negative emotions, such as anxiety, fear, and a sense of not being welcomed or appreciated (Goodall and MacKenzie 2019; Horgan, Kenny, and Flynn 2023).

Interestingly, despite autistic males and females sharing core difficulties in social communication and interaction (American Psychiatric Association 2022), their school experiences seem to differ greatly. For instance, research has shown that autistic girls tend to miss more school days than autistic boys, which may negatively impact their academic achievement and socioemotional development (Sasso and Sansour 2024). Contrary to the belief that autistic individuals are less driven by interactions with others, the socioemotional component is highly relevant for autistic adolescents (Tesfaye et al. 2023), and especially for autistic females (Ryan et al. 2021; Sedgewick et al. 2016). In this sense, while autistic boys indicate to spend more time alone, autistic girls spend more time at school engaged in conversations with peers (Dean, Harwood, and Kasari 2017; Sedgewick et al. 2016). Yet, according to parents, these interactions can be superficial and rarely develop into the desired friendships (Halsall, Clarke, and Crane 2021). Indeed, although autistic girls may have a strong desire to fit in, they often struggle to fully integrate into groups of friends (Cook, Ogden, and Winstone 2018). Building relationships with female peers can be particularly challenging for them, as these peers are sometimes perceived as judgemental, for example, of autistic girls' appearances and interests (Tierney, Burns, and Kilbey 2016). Moreover, sustaining friendships is not always feasible, as autistic girls report feeling 'left behind' by former friends who go on to establish connections with others (Ryan et al. 2021, 399). As a result, autistic girls themselves report feeling lonely (Foggo Rebecca and Webster 2017; Moyse and Porter 2014) and having fewer close friends compared to their peers (Dean et al. 2014). Notably, autistic females are more prone than autistic males to modify their behaviours to fulfil others' expectations (Schuck, Flores, and Fung 2019; Seers and Hogg 2021), a practice known as 'masking' or 'camouflaging' (National Autistic Society 2024). While masking strategies may allow autistic individuals to conceal their learning needs (Halsall, Clarke, and Crane 2021) and social challenges (Dean, Harwood, and Kasari 2017; Horgan, Kenny, and Flynn 2023), these

practices have negative long- and short-term consequences, such as exhaustion, anxiety and even identity conflicts (Halsall, Clarke, and Crane 2021).

Teachers play a critical role in shaping positive school experiences for autistic students. Interactions in which teachers convey that these students are welcomed, accepted and understood can have a significant impact (Lebenhagen 2024). More specifically, some autistic students may depend on teachers' guidance to progress through lessons and complete tasks (Esqueda Villegas, Van der Steen, and Minnaert 2025a). However, seeking such support can depend on the presence of a positive teacher–student relationship, in which autistic students feel comfortable approaching their teachers with questions (Esqueda Villegas, Van der Steen, and Minnaert 2025a). Unfortunately, a recent study found that autistic female adolescents experience poorer quality in the teacher–student relationship compared to their male counterparts (Zañartu and Pérez-Salas 2023). Along these lines, a study of Cridland et al. (2014) revealed that (mainstream) teachers struggle to recognise the challenges of autistic girls during their interactions. For instance, if autistic girls have good grades or do not exhibit behavioural issues, teachers sometimes (wrongly) assume that they are not experiencing difficulties (Baldwin and Costley 2016; Jarman and Rayner 2015). Indeed, teachers' understanding of autism is often based on stereotypical male behaviours (Cridland et al. 2014; Munroe and Dunleavy 2023; Whitlock et al. 2020). This has likely led to autistic females receiving low levels of support from teachers (Baldwin and Costley 2016; Cridland et al. 2014), which is perceived as one of the 'worst things' about their time in school (Baldwin and Costley 2016, 488). Another issue is that schools may not adequately address incidents reported by autistic girls, perceiving their accounts as exaggerated or embellished (Cook, Ogden, and Winstone 2018). Gray et al. (2021) reported that 40% of school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators in their study had limited knowledge of how autism manifests in girls, despite 85% acknowledging that autism presents differently across genders.

Given that teachers and schools might be overlooking or dismissing the needs of autistic female students (Baldwin and Costley 2016; Cridland et al. 2014), the main objective of our study was to explore the needs of autistic females in (mainstream) secondary education and examine the different need-profiles that can be found. We focused on this particular setting since secondary schools present new academic and social challenges for autistic students (Aubineau and Blicharska 2020; Carrington, Templeton, and Papinczak 2003; Croydon et al. 2019; Humphrey and Lewis 2008). Additionally, only a handful of studies have been conducted in the secondary education environment, with the majority of research focusing on their experiences in primary school (Esqueda Villegas, Van der Steen, and Minnaert 2024). Therefore, this is one of the first studies to show the perspective of current and former autistic female students on what support is crucial for an inclusive secondary school experience.

It should be noted that throughout this paper we use identity-first language (IFL) when referring to autistic people and our research participants. While there is no broad consensus within the autism community regarding the use of IFL versus person-first language (PFL; Taboas, Doepke, and Zimmerman 2023), research suggests an inclination towards IFL (Kenny et al. 2016; Lei, Jones, and Brosnan 2021). Furthermore, a recent study conducted in the Netherlands (the context of the present research)

found that younger participants tended to favour IFL (Buijsman, Begeer, and Scheeren 2023).

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Study design

For this study, we employed Q-methodology (Brown 1980). Using both quantitative and qualitative research techniques (Ramlo 2016), the overarching purpose of Q-methodology is to identify participants with shared points of view regarding a particular theme (McKeown and Thomas 2013; Ramlo 2016; Shemmings and Ingunn 2012). To achieve this, participants are typically required to arrange statements (known as Q-sorting) in a grid according to the significance these statements hold for them (McKeown and Thomas 2013; Ramlo 2016). Those with similar sorting patterns are grouped in the same 'factor' (Brown 1980).

In educational research, a growing body of scholars has employed Q-methodology to uncover the subjective experiences of teachers and/or students (Lundberg and de Leeuw 2024; Lundberg, de Leeuw, and Aliani 2020). Notably, there is no consensus among researchers on how many participants must take part in a Q-study (Watts and Stenner 2012). In this sense, Brown (1980, 192) argues that Q-studies need 'enough subjects to establish the existence of a factor for purposes of comparing one factor with another'. Q-studies conducted in the educational field tend to include an average of 37 research participants (Lundberg, de Leeuw, and Aliani 2020).

2.2 Participants

This study is part of a larger cross-country research project that explores the differences and similarities in the needs of autistic students in the Netherlands and Mexico. Recruitment took place both online and in person. For the online recruitment, the researchers shared advertisements with a link to the Q-sort (in Qualtrics) in autism-centred Facebook groups and other social media platforms. For in-person recruitment, researchers contacted mainstream secondary schools directly and asked school directors or coordinators to share the study information with eligible (autistic) students and their families. Participants were eligible if they: (1) had an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders fifth edition (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association 2022), or a prior DSM-IV diagnosis (e.g. Asperger's Syndrome; American Psychiatric Association 2022), a diagnostic framework predominantly used in both countries; (2) were aged 13–25 years old; (3) had been enrolled or were currently enrolled in mainstream secondary education; and (4) had their main residence in the Netherlands or Mexico. Notably, autistic individuals were not excluded if they had a co-occurring condition, such as an anxiety disorder or oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). Any additional diagnoses could be disclosed under the 'Other' category in the socio-demographic section of the questionnaire; however, this was not mandatory.

During the data collection phase, we unexpectedly gathered a large number of responses from Dutch autistic females. As previously stated, given that the autistic female

perspective has received much less attention in research (Cridland et al. 2014), we analysed the needs of current and former (autistic) students who identified themselves as female separately, which is the focus of this paper. Results from the Dutch and Mexican autistic male students are reported elsewhere (Esqueda Villegas et al. 2025) and are not discussed in this paper. The final sample included in this article thus consisted of 38 autistic Dutch females, with a mean age of 20.4 years ($SD = 2.6$).

2.3 Measurements – statements

The initial collection of statements in our Q-sort was based on the main findings of a systematic review focusing on the pre-requirements that must be considered to facilitate the inclusion of autistic students in mainstream secondary education (Esqueda Villegas, Van der Steen, and Minnaert 2024). In particular, our Q-set (statements) was designed to explore how themes identified in the literature, such as the physical school environment and social support, were experienced by current and former autistic learners in two under-represented countries in autism research: the Netherlands and Mexico, both of which emphasise inclusive education.

While there is not an ideal fixed-number of statements, Watts and Stenner (2012) suggest using a limited number if the participants have disabilities, as the sorting process might be fatiguing. These authors also emphasise that the statements should provide sufficient coverage of the subject of study (Watts and Stenner 2012). To ensure our Q-set accurately reflected the needs of autistic students, we piloted it among six autistic individuals (three from the Netherlands and three from Mexico) in their native languages: Dutch or Spanish. During the pilot phase, we asked participants whether the statements made sense to them (especially given that they were derived from international literature and not specific to their countries and region), whether any wording was unclear or if any other pressing needs were missing. Based on their feedback, additional statements were included, and others were rephrased or deleted for cultural sensitivity in translation. The statements covered possible needs concerning the school environment (e.g. *'I need a structured routine at school'*), teaching methods and tools (e.g. *'I need school materials presented in different ways, such as pictures and videos'*), teachers (e.g. *'I need for my teachers to be understanding of my autism'*), classmates (e.g. *'I need to build friendships at school'*), and feelings at school (e.g. *'I need to feel that I am part of this school'*). Table 1 shows the complete list of 36 statements (translated into English for publication purposes), indicating the average value that each factor gave to each statement.

2.4 Procedure

The Q-sort was administered online using Qualtrics, allowing participants to sort statements at their own pace. In that sense, there was no time limit, which helped to prevent potential time pressure or anxiety during the sorting process. Before accessing the online Q-sort, autistic individuals were presented with information and consent forms. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous. Participants could optionally disclose sociodemographic information, including age, gender, school level (if they were still enrolled in secondary education), and the type of autism diagnosis they had received (i.e. Asperger Syndrome). Once consent was obtained,

Table 1. Statements and the weighted average Q-sorts for the four factors.

In mainstream secondary school, I need/needed	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
1. A classroom free of noise	3	2	1	2
2. A structured routine at school	4	−2	0	2
3. A small class	0	−1	4	4
4. To know how to adapt to unfamiliar situations	1	1	−2	2
5. To be treated as every other student of my class	0	0	−4	1
6. That teachers understand when I want to be left alone*	2	−3	−1	0
7. For my school to have different times for class breaks*	−3	−2	0	1
8. Activities in class that help me learn	−4	−3	−1	−2
9. To work in small groups	−2	0	4	3
10. A quiet space to go to when there is too much noise in class	3	2	−2	3
11. A teaching assistant to help me with my tasks in class	−1	−4	3	−4
12. Individual help from my teachers*	0	−1	2	−3
13. More time to finish my school activities	1	−1	1	−1
14. More time to finish my exams	3	−1	2	−1
15. To be able to work on my laptop or tablet in class	−3	−4	−4	−3
16. Having school materials presented in different ways, such as pictures and videos*	−2	−2	1	0
17. For my teachers to understand the way I learn	1	0	2	−1
18. To have fixed seats in the classroom*	1	−3	0	1
19. That teachers are approachable	1	2	3	0
20. That my teachers give me clear and detailed instructions on what I have to do*	4	4	1	1
21. That my teachers help me when I do not understand difficult activities	1	1	3	0
22. For my teachers to spend more time with me during class	−3	−2	−1	−4
23. For my teachers to show they care about me	−1	1	0	−2
24. For my teachers to be understanding of my autism	2	1	0	2
25. That my parents communicate my needs to my teachers	−1	0	−3	−2
26. To be able to confide in teachers	2	1	0	−1
27. To learn tools to communicate with my classmates at school*	−1	−1	−2	−3
28. To have a friend I can trust*	0	3	−1	3
29. To collaborate with my classmates during class	−4	0	2	−2
30. For my classmates to accept me as I am	−2	3	−1	4
31. For my classmates to take my autism into consideration	0	−1	−3	1
32. To build friendships at school	−2	4	−3	1
33. For my school to take action against bullying*	−1	1	−1	−1
34. To feel that I am part of this school*	−1	2	1	0
35. To feel safe at school	2	3	1	0
36. To learn how to handle my emotions (such as being stressed, sad or angry) at school*	0	0	−2	−1
Eigenvalue	8.5	3.4	2.1	1.9
Explanation study variance	16	9	6	12

Note: Factor 1: 'Learning on my own' ($n = 12$); Factor 2: 'Having friends and feeling safe' ($n = 8$); Factor 3: 'Guidance and help from teachers' ($n = 4$); Factor 4: 'Acceptance of my autism and to be treated like everyone else' ($n = 8$). The numbers in each column indicate the average sorting within each factor. The most pressing needs were given a score of + 4 whereas the least important needs were scored as −4. Statements marked with an asterisk (*) were added or rephrased, based on a pilot study with six autistic students from the Netherlands and Mexico.

the Q-sorting procedure was explained with both written and visual instructions. A total of 36 statements of possible needs were shown to the participants. Based on their own reflection about their needs during secondary education, participants had to rank *all* statements from 'little need' (−4) to 'definitely need' (+4) in a grid (see Figure 1). Each cell in the grid could contain only one statement, meaning it was a 'forced-choice setup'. Yet, participants could rearrange their sorting of statements at any point, which gave them full autonomy in terms of deciding which needs to prioritise (McKeown and Thomas 2013). Lastly, participants could elaborate on the reason for their two least and most important needs, which all participants did. These anonymised elaborations are added as supplementary material. Ethical approval was

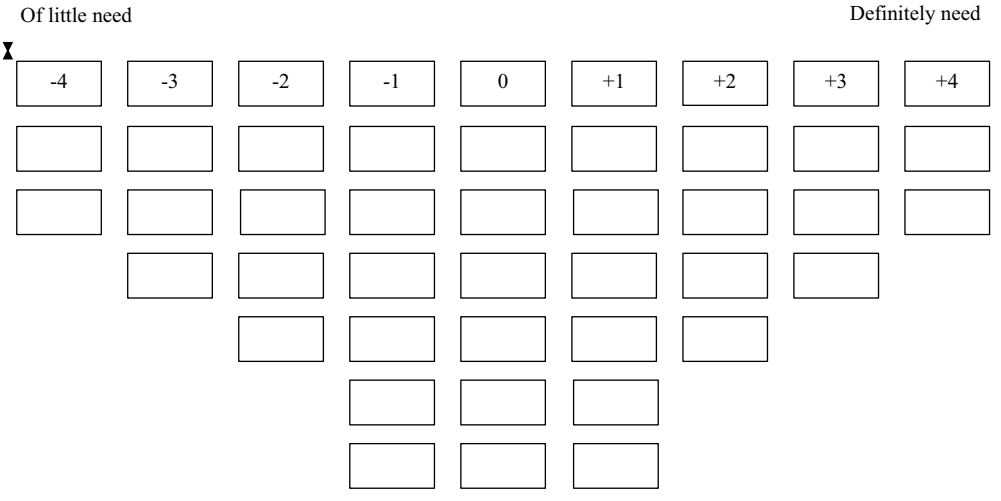

Figure 1. Q-sort grid with 36 possible educational needs of autistic students.

granted by the ethics review chamber from the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences of the host university.

2.5 Data analyses

To identify groups of current and former autistic female students with different needs, we analysed the Q-sorts using PQ-Method software (Schmolck 2002). We explored several factor solutions by looking at the eigenvalues, correlations between factors, number of participants within each factor and the distinguishing statements (McKeown and Thomas 2013; Watts and Stenner 2012). Following the threshold suggested by Watts and Stenner (2012), factors were retained for further analysis only if their eigenvalues exceeded the starting value of 1.0. To include as many viewpoints as possible, a Centroid Factor Analysis with both Varimax and by-hand rotation was performed (Watts and Stenner 2012). For each factor, we created crib sheets to analyse the overall sorting of statements. Subsequently, we qualitatively interpreted each factor, constructing a narrative that reflects the distinct viewpoints of participants.

3. Results

We selected a four-factor solution for the current and former autistic female students, which explained 43% of the total variance. The output data generated in PQ-Method software revealed that six students were not significantly associated with a single factor. According to Watts and Stenner (2012) their responses do not sufficiently represent or define one particular viewpoint and therefore, the Q-sorts from these participants were excluded from further analyses.

The correlations between Factors 1–4 ranged from .08 to .42, indicating low to moderate associations among the factors in the selected solution. Participant

Table 2. Sociodemographic information of participants.

Factor	Participant #	Age	School level	Graduated or currently in secondary education	Self-reported diagnosis
1 'Learning on my own' ($n = 12$)	5	20	VMBO	Graduated	Asperger Syndrome
	7	19	VMBO	Graduated	PDD-NOS
	12	22	HAVO	Graduated	Asperger Syndrome
	16	24	VMBO	Graduated	PDD-NOS and ADHD
	20	22	HAVO	Graduated	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	21	19	VWO	Currently enrolled	Asperger Syndrome
	27	25	HAVO	Graduated	PDD-NOS
	28	17	VWO	Currently enrolled	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	31	19	VWO	Currently enrolled	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	33	16	HAVO	Currently enrolled	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	34	18	HAVO	Currently enrolled	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	35	20	VMBO	Graduated	PDD-NOS
2 'Having friends and feeling safe' ($n = 8$)	6	21	HAVO	Graduated	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	9	21	HAVO	Graduated	PDD-NOS
	19	17	HAVO	Currently enrolled	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	23	20	VMBO	Graduated	PDD-NOS
	24	20	HAVO	Graduated	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	29	19	VWO	Graduated	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	32	25	HAVO	Graduated	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	38	25	VWO	Graduated	Asperger Syndrome
3 'Guidance and help from teachers' ($n = 4$)	2	19	VMBO	Graduated	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	3	22	VMBO	Graduated	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	4	16	HAVO	Currently enrolled	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	15	–	VMBO	Currently enrolled	Autism Spectrum Disorder

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued).

Factor	Participant #	Age	School level	Graduated or currently in secondary education	Self-reported diagnosis
4 'Acceptance of my autism and to be treated like everyone else' ($n = 8$)	1	21	–	Graduated	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	8	24	VMBO	Graduated	PDD-NOS
	11	–	VWO	Currently enrolled	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	14	22	VMBO	Graduated	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	18	17	VMBO	Graduated	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	26	22	VWO	Graduated	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	30	17	VWO	Currently enrolled	Autism Spectrum Disorder
	36	19	HAVO	Graduated	Autism Spectrum Disorder

Note. VMBO = Pre-vocational secondary education, HAVO = Senior general secondary education, and VWO = Pre-university education.

characteristics are presented in Table 2. In the following section, we provide a qualitative interpretation of each factor, representing largely distinct viewpoints of current and former autistic female students in the Netherlands. We indicate the number of statements with a # followed by its average factor ranking. For example, #11/4 means that statement 11 (see Table 1) was ranked as +4 within a particular factor.

3.1 Factor 1: 'learning on my own' (n = 12)

The 12 autistic females who associated with Factor 1 seemed to need the appropriate environmental conditions to learn independently. Their most important needs were a structured environment at school (#2/4) and for teachers to give clear and detailed instructions on what they had to do (#20/4). If clear instructions were not given, students elaborated that they would 'block and panic' (Participant 27), 'get very stressed' (Participant 34), or believed there was 'no work to be done' (Participant 12). They also emphasised the need for sensory adjustments, such as a noise-free classroom (#1/3) and a quiet space to go to (#10/3). More time to finish school activities (#13/1) and exams (#14/3) was also appreciated, as this would give them 'a lot more peace' (Participant 7).

The students in this factor seemed more comfortable working on their own, rather than *within* a community. They expressed less or no need to work in small groups (#9/-2), communicate with classmates (#27/-1) or collaborate with them (#29/-4). Participant 16, for instance, elaborated that 'working together is not fun because everyone does what they want'. Others believed that working independently allowed them to 'have

more control' (Participant 33) and prevented classmates from 'ruining' the task (Participant 28).

3.2 Factor 2: 'having friends and feeling safe' (n = 8)

Factor 2 had a strong need for social support and a safe space in which they could be themselves, without being bullied. They were mostly interested in building friendships (#32/4), having a friend they could trust (#28/3), and feeling part of the school (#34/2). Peer-relationships were highly valued by these students. For instance, Participant 29 elaborated that having a friend: 'makes me feel safer and it makes everything easier and nicer'. Furthermore, they needed to feel safe in their environment (#35/3) and for schools to take action against bullying (#33/1), especially as they were often bullied for their 'looks and behaviours' (Participant 6).

Contrary to factor 1, students in factor 2 had less need for accommodations to learn independently. Among their lowest-ranked statements were having a structured routine (#2/-2), a fixed seat (#18/-3), and more time to finish school activities (#13/-1) or exams (#14/-1). To work on a laptop or tablet (#15/-4) was also less appreciated, as technology was mostly seen as 'a distractor' (Participant 9) and writing was 'easier' (Participant 6).

3.3 Factor 3: 'guidance and help from teachers' (n = 4)

The highest priority of autistic females in Factor 3 seemed to be guidance from teachers. They valued having a teaching assistant to help them (#11/3), individual help from teachers (#12/2), teacher guidance during difficult activities (#21/3), teachers being approachable (#19/3) and also understanding of the way they learn (#17/2). Participant 2 elaborated that help at the beginning of an activity was crucial to get into 'the right direction'. To receive individual and tailored support, they indicated the need for a small class (#3/4) and working in small groups (#9/4).

Although participants associated with Factor 3 highly valued support from teachers, they were less interested in receiving that same support from their peers, which contrasts with the needs of autistic females in Factor 2. For example, participants in Factor 3 expressed less need for having a friend they trust (#28/-1), building friendships at school (#32/-3), and classmates taking their autism into consideration (#31/-3). Participant 15, for instance, elaborated she already 'had two friends and having more would be too difficult'.

3.4 Factor 4: 'acceptance of my autism and to be treated like everyone else' (n = 8)

Factor 4 wanted teachers and peers to be considerate of their autism but did not want to be treated in a 'special' way. They mostly valued being accepted by their classmates (#30/4) and for them to take their autism into consideration (#31/1). As Participant 26 elaborated: 'If classmates don't judge you . . . it's easier to be yourself and that makes me a lot happier'. In addition, they sought the understanding (of their autism) from teachers (#24/2) and preferred to be treated as every other student (#5/1).

Additional support that could flag them as being different was less appreciated. For instance, they did not indicate a need for teachers to spend more time with them during class (#22/-4), individual help from teachers (#12/-3) or a teaching assistant (#11/-4).

Interestingly, the 'extra' help they ranked (slightly) higher seemed subtler, such as a quiet space to go to (#16/3), different times for class breaks (#7/1) and a fixed seat (#18/1).

4. Discussion

The perspective of autistic females has been under-researched (Cridland et al. 2014; Goodall and MacKenzie 2019). As a result, many teachers have a limited understanding of how autism manifests in females (Cridland et al. 2014; Munroe and Dunleavy 2023; Whitlock et al. 2020) and how best to support them in the school environment (Baldwin and Costley 2016; Costley et al. 2021). This lack of recognition of the unique challenges and needs faced by autistic females appears to hinder their educational experiences (Baldwin and Costley 2016; Costley et al. 2021). To contribute to this area of research, our Q-study aimed to explore the needs of autistic female students who are currently attending or have graduated within the past 7 years from mainstream secondary education in the Netherlands. Interestingly, while the use of Q-methodology in educational research has increased in recent years (Lundberg, de Leeuw, and Aliani 2020), few studies have applied it in research involving autistic participants. Lewis (2009), however, has long advocated for more structured methodologies and techniques (such as the use of predefined statements) to enhance the meaningful participation of autistic people in research. In this study, the Q-sort procedure encouraged participants to reflect on and prioritise aspects of schooling that matter most and less to them, within a clear and structured framework that minimised ambiguity. This underscores that Q-methodology may hold particular promise for engaging autistic youth in educational research (Lundberg, de Leeuw, and Aliani 2020).

Using Q-methodology, we identified four distinct groups of autistic females, each with its own needs-profile. The 12 autistic females in Factor 1 emphasised a strong need for independent learning in a structured environment. Receiving detailed and clear instructions was crucial for them to avoid panic and stress. This aligns with findings from Anderson et al. (2024), in which a young autistic girl highlighted the need for step-by-step directions to complete tasks and prevent distress. Interestingly, Factor 1 seemed less driven by socially oriented needs than the other factors. In fact, the autistic females in factor 1 experienced social learning activities as burdensome, mainly due to (disruptive) behaviours from classmates. Indeed, it appears that autistic students intend to engage with lessons, but classmates' behaviours 'get in the way' and hinder their task completion (Costley et al. 2021).

In contrast to Factor 1, the most pressing needs of the remaining factors were related to the social aspects of attending secondary school. For instance, the eight autistic females in Factor 2 prioritised developing friendships and feeling safe. Previous research suggests that, although building authentic connections is challenging for autistic girls, they may have a strong desire to fit in (Cook, Ogden, and Winstone 2018; Halsall, Clarke, and Crane 2021). By acknowledging the need of autistic females to create social bonds, dissatisfying school experiences may be prevented (Baldwin and Costley 2016). The four autistic females in Factor 3 showed a different 'social' need and mostly wanted support from their teachers – but not from their peers – to facilitate their (own) learning process. These students valued individual support, guidance during difficult activities, and approachable teachers. This is consistent with autistic students in Goodall (2018) study

who emphasised the need for teachers who understand autism and their individual needs. Conversely, the eight autistic females in Factor 4 were reluctant to receive teachers' (social) support, as they primarily valued social acceptance of their peers (cf. Horgan, Kenny, and Flynn 2023) and feared that additional classroom support would contribute to bullying. Indeed, previous research has shown that while autistic students recognise that they experience difficulties at school, they may refuse support because classmates become aware of their differences and tease them for it (Makin, Hill, and Pellicano 2017). Consequently, many autistic students may not feel respected or understood by their peers (Lebenhagen 2024). Nonetheless, positive social interactions at school are key to enhancing autistic students' well-being (Humphrey and Lewis 2008). Yet, the current research shows that what constitutes positive interactions at school can be very different for different autistic women, who have varying nuances and preferences in social matters.

Overall, these findings reinforce the understanding that the needs of autistic learners are heterogenous (Anderson et al. 2024). Therefore, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for supporting autistic female students during secondary education. Instead, teachers should adopt a tailored approach that responds to the diverse educational needs of autistic girls (Ayirebi and Thomas 2024). Likewise, our findings align with prior research emphasising the critical role of fostering social skills to improve autistic students' educational experiences (Ayirebi and Thomas 2024; Goodall and MacKenzie 2019; Jarman and Rayner 2015; Saggers et al. 2019; Tierney, Burns, and Kilbey 2016). Notably, many educators in both primary (Van der Steen et al. 2020) and secondary school settings (Esqueda Villegas, van der Steen, and Minnaert 2025b) have expressed a need for strategies to support the social skills of their autistic students. This aligns with the priorities expressed by the current and former autistic female students in this study, as well as the needs identified in the international literature (Ayirebi and Thomas 2024; Brede et al. 2017; Emam and Farrell 2009). However, in previous studies teachers noted that the curriculum and its requirements can limit their ability to incorporate social aspects into their teaching practices (Emam and Farrell 2009). This is surprising, as the non-academic needs of autistic students, such as life and social skills, can be perceived as more pressing than academic ones, due to the increased pressure to belong at school (Makin, Hill, and Pellicano 2017; Saggers et al. 2019; Whitaker 2007).

4.1 Strengths and limitations

As with any research, the results of this study must be considered with some limitations. First, the final list of statements (see Table 1) may not be exhaustive of the needs of *all* autistic students, as they are a very heterogeneous group (Anderson et al. 2024). This means that some of their needs might not be included in the Q-sort, even though the statements were piloted and discussed with autistic students. Second, while a clinical diagnosis of ASD was an inclusion criterion, the online nature of this study precluded researchers from verifying participants' diagnoses. We acknowledge that access to diagnostic evaluations can be limited for specific groups, including females and other underrepresented populations (Ardeleanu et al. 2024). As such, we equally valued and included the perspectives of participants who self-identify as autistic, even if they had not received a formal diagnosis at the time of data collection. A third limitation is that we also invited former (mainstream) secondary school students to reflect on their school experiences, up to 7 years after

graduation. According to the European Commission (2024), in recent years the Netherlands has been undergoing national reforms and policy developments that have influenced school and classroom practices. Consequently, it is plausible that some of the needs identified by former students (i.e. improvement of teaching methods) may have already been addressed in more recent educational practices and policies implemented in the country to enhance the inclusion of all learners (Inspectorate of Education 2023). Despite plausible improvements, continuous monitoring is still required to ensure these improvements in the long run. Moreover, it is possible that former students remember fewer details of their needs in school. Nevertheless, previous research has found that autistic participants provide meaningful insights during their recall of school experiences (Baldwin and Costley 2016; Goodall 2019). The detailed elaborations of the most/least pressing needs from our autistic participants also support these findings (see Supplementary Materials). With the scarce literature on autistic females (Cridland et al. 2014), we believe that even retrospective reporting is crucial for a better understanding of the autistic female perspective.

4.2 Conclusion

This study shows how the most pressing social needs of current and former autistic female students can vary greatly. The factors (groups) in this study differed in how they emphasised friendships, support from teachers, or social acceptance. This diversity has a direct impact on the way schools can optimally meet these needs. For instance, while some autistic female students highly valued individual support, others felt this could potentially compromise their social acceptance. Moreover, one group actually expressed an aversion to social educational activities. This study, therefore, shows that these varying social needs deserve particular attention, even when autistic girls are in close proximity of their peers at school, or spend much time talking and laughing with peers (Dean et al. 2014; Dean, Harwood, and Kasari 2017). As the needs of autistic boys are likely different from the socially oriented needs we identified for the autistic girls (Sedgewick et al. 2016), future research should focus on identifying their most pressing needs in secondary education.

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ORCID

Fernanda Esqueda Villegas http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7300-5123
Steffie van der Steen http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7827-4525
Alexander Minnaert http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3886-1634

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