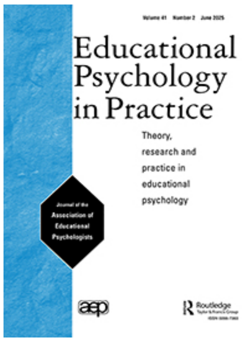

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The lived experiences of masking black Autistic girls in UK education: "before people see the autism, they see my race."

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the lived experiences of masking and camouflaging among Black Autistic girls in UK education, addressing a significant gap in autism research and educational psychology practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants aged 16–17, centring voices rarely represented in literature or policy. A novel framework, Kaleidoscope Analysis, was developed to interpret the data. Combining Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Intersectionality Theory, and Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), this approach offers layered insight into how individual experiences are shaped by wider structural inequalities. Five key themes were identified: acceptance and belonging; navigating social expectations; the intersection of race, gender, and autism; sensory overload; and the importance of relational support. The findings highlight how masking emerges as a strategy for navigating environments shaped by neurotypical, racialised, and gendered expectations rooted in societal norms of Whiteness and ability. This study recommends educational psychologists (EPs) and related professionals adopt intersectional, neuro-affirming approaches in their practice, highlighting the importance of pupil voice, critical reflection, and anti-oppressive practice in creating inclusive learning environments. Future research is required to explore a wider range of intersecting identities and include Autistic individuals who use diverse forms of communication.

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Intersectionality; masking black Autistic girls; UK education; Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit); autism; neurodiversity

Introduction

While the Autistic experience is diverse, for masking and camouflaging Black girls it often comes with layers of complexities; masking their authentic selves while navigating a world where they often feel invisible in multiple ways. The concept of Autistic masking and camouflaging has seldom been explored considering the intersection of race and gender. This research aims to illuminate the lived experiences of Black Autistic girls who mask and camouflage in the UK education system. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), intersectionality theory and Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), this research highlights the realities of their experiences.

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Language adopted in this study

This study takes an affirming stance, using language that respects the communities in focus. It adopts identity-first language, in line with research showing its preference among many Autistic individuals (Kenny et al., 2016), while acknowledging that language preferences vary. Autistic is capitalised to respect the community (Autistic Self Advocacy Network [ASAN], 2009); Black and White are capitalised to highlight racialisation, privilege, and oppression, while white remains lowercase in discussions of supremacy or privilege (DiAngelo, 2018). The current paper reports findings from doctoral research that explored masking Autistic girls' experiences at the intersection of race and gender. In this paper, the literature reviewed synthesises key themes and theoretical framings from the original thesis (Nelson, 2024), offering a conceptual backdrop for the study's methodology and analysis.

Conceptual lens: autistic masking, intersectionality and identity

The understanding of autism has evolved significantly over time. It has historically been framed through a narrow medical lens, often focused on deficits and behaviour modification (Silberman & Sacks, 2016). Early conceptualisations privileged a White, cisgender, middle-class male profile, shaping diagnostic tools and public perception (Annamma et al., 2016). While understanding has progressed towards recognising autism as a neurodevelopmental difference, these historical biases continue to affect access to diagnosis and support (Diemer et al., 2022).

For educational psychologists (EPs), this has direct implications. Autistic girls, especially those from racially minoritised backgrounds, are more likely to be under-recognised or misinterpreted due to differences in presentation and the effects of masking (Autistic Girls Network (AGN), 2022; Pearson & Rose, 2023). Cultural norms and racial stereotypes can result in behaviour being seen as disruptive rather than neurodivergent (Corbett & Perepa, 2007), potentially influencing referrals, assessment outcomes, and support pathways. This suggests that EPs should use an intersectional lens and actively seek out the perspectives and needs of underrepresented Autistic learners, as highlighted by national charities and researchers advocating for more equitable autism identification and support (AGN, 2022; National Autistic Society, 2023).

Masking and camouflaging

Autistic masking and camouflaging refer to strategies used to suppress or hide Autistic traits to appear neurotypical (Radulski, 2022). Hull et al. (2017) identified three components of camouflaging: masking (concealing traits); compensation (developing coping strategies); and assimilation (blending into social norms). Radulski (2022) distinguishes camouflaging as an external process of appearing non-Autistic, and masking as an internal effort to suppress traits; both terms are used in this study.

While these behaviours may support short-term social acceptance, they often come at a significant psychological cost. Masking has been linked to exhaustion, anxiety, identity confusion, and impaired executive functioning (Chapman, 2020; Tierney et al., 2016). These behaviours typically develop subconsciously in response to social pressures and unsupportive environments (Bargiela et al., 2016). In schools, masking might involve suppressing stimming, avoiding eye contact, or using rehearsed interactions, making distress less visible and delaying needed support.

Although camouflaging is more frequently reported among Autistic females, particularly those with higher levels of Autistic traits (Milner et al., 2023; Wood-Downie et al., 2021), Autistic males also engage in these behaviours, though their experiences remain under-researched (Fombonne, 2020). Gendered social and cultural expectations likely contribute to this difference in the presentation (Milner et al., 2023; Tubío-Fungueiriño et al., 2021).

For EPs, recognising masking is essential when interpreting behaviour, gathering pupil voice, or consulting with staff. Without this awareness, Autistic girls, who are more likely to mask, risk being overlooked or misinterpreted (Milner et al., 2023; Wood-Downie et al., 2021). Masking should be understood as a survival strategy rooted in the environment, not a sign of coping or social competence (Mandy, 2019). Milton’s (2012) “double empathy problem” illustrates that distress often stems, not from autism itself but from a mismatch between Autistic individuals and their social environment. EPs can play a key role in reframing masking as a sign of unmet need, rather than its absence.

The intersection of autism, race, and gender

Autism is often understood through lenses shaped by Whiteness, maleness, and normative standards of ability, an approach that obscures the experiences of those at the intersection of racial, gendered, and neurodivergent identities (Annamma et al., 2016; Pearson & Rose, 2023). Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989) provides a framework for understanding how systems of oppression, such as racism, ableism, and sexism, overlap to create unique experiences of marginalisation. Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) builds on this by exploring how race and ability are socially constructed together to uphold dominant standards of Whiteness and normalcy (Annamma et al., 2016), with Whiteness being a socially constructed system of racial categorisation that confers unearned privileges and maintains power structures benefiting those perceived as White (Frankenberg, 1993).

These frameworks are not only theoretical but may also reflect the lived experiences of individuals navigating multiple marginalised identities. Giwa-Onaiwu (2016) highlights that as a Black Autistic woman she was misunderstood, received inadequate support and was mistreated due to her characteristics being attributed to her race and/or gender. Adewale (2015) describes ignorance of what ableism means for someone who is racially minoritised and the challenge of deciphering between racism and ableism.

Lewis and Arday (2023) argue racial hierarchies are maintained through unchallenged labelling of White people as either smart (abled) or needing more care (disabled). This intersects with the concept of neurotypical hegemony, which also marginalises White neurodivergent individuals. This compounded marginalisation, what Fierros and Conroy (2002) refer to as “double jeopardy”, is linked to what Held (2020) terms epistemic violence: the dismissal of knowledge and experience that fall outside dominant norms. Understanding these dynamics is essential for EPs who wish to engage in equitable practice and recognise how intersecting systems shape both children’s experiences and professional responses.

The context of UK educational settings

Lewis and Arday (2023) argue that the culture of UK education exposes how race, class, and neurodiversity intersect, intensifying inequalities for racially minoritised neurodivergent learners. Within schools, racism and ableism work in tandem, often invisibly, through everyday practices such as the labelling of racially minoritised pupils as "at-risk" or non-conforming (Annamma et al., 2016; Da Silva & Hubbard, 2024). These practices may reinforce the dominant norms of Whiteness and ability and communicate implicit deficit-based assumptions.

For Autistic pupils, particularly those who mask, these dynamics can result in a significant disconnect between external perceptions and internal experience. Masking can lead professionals to assume a child is coping, while distress remains unseen (Hull et al., 2017). Families frequently report difficulties not evident in school, highlighting the need for EPs to actively listen to caregivers and recognise that distress may be hidden behind compliance or sociability (AGN, 2022). Racism compounds these disparities. Black children with SEND are more likely to be excluded or placed in segregated settings (Gillborn, 2012; Wallace & Joseph-Salisbury, 2021), raising concerns about how intersectional identities influence pathways to support.

Rationale for the current study and research questions

Despite this, there is currently no published research on the educational experiences of masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girls in the UK. This current study therefore aims to explore their unique experiences, focusing on how intersectionality impacts their daily lives, diagnosis, and support. To support this exploration, this study introduces Kaleidoscope Analysis (Nelson, 2024), a novel analytical framework that allows for a layered understanding of lived experience, attending to both individual meaning-making and broader social structures. It offers EPs a way to critically reflect on their role in these systems and engage more holistically with the experiences of Autistic learners.

The study seeks to amplify the voices of Black Autistic girls, creating space for their identities and realities to be recognised and valued. It aims to inform more equitable, neuro-affirming, and culturally responsive practices in schools and educational psychology. The research addresses the following questions:

(1) What is the lived experience of camouflaging Black Autistic females?
(2) How can these experiences be understood through DisCrit and intersectionality lenses?

Methodology

This study is grounded in a social constructionist paradigm and, as noted, employs Kaleidoscope Analysis (Nelson, 2024), a conceptual framework developed to reflect the layered interplay between individual experience and wider societal influences. Just as a kaleidoscope refracts light into shifting patterns, this lens allowed exploration of how intersecting identities shape and are shaped by societal norms, structures and cultural narratives, See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Kaleidoscope analysis framework developed by Nelson (2024), illustrated by Ahmed as cited in Nelson (2024)

Reflexivity and positionality statement

As a neurodivergent, Black female researcher and mother of daughters masking neurodivergence, the first author's positionality formed the prism through which insight emerged at every stage of the research process. The research questions and interview approach emerged organically through embodied reflexivity, grounded not in existing literature but in lived experience, relational insight, and resonance with the participants. This inductive and relational framing reflects the social constructionist paradigm underpinning the study, which recognises knowledge as contextually situated and co-constructed. To enhance trustworthiness (Finlay, 2006), the researcher engaged in bracketing, requiring a balance between embracing lived experience and attending critically to the researcher's interpretive lens. To ensure credibility and enhance integrity, a reflexive diary was kept, and supervision employed throughout. In this way, it is argued that the researcher's subjectivity was not a limitation to be neutralised but a source for insight.

Participants

The study aimed for four to 10 participants, a range recommended by Smith et al. (2022) to ensure depth and quality in IPA interviews. All four girls met the inclusion criteria by identifying as Black or of Black heritage, being assigned female at birth, participating in UK education in London, and being aged between 16 and 18 years and therefore at an educational stage that enabled them to reflect back on their educational experiences and the impact of masking and camouflaging. They self-identified as masking autism, and had a formal diagnosis of autism. To protect anonymity, participant-chosen pseudonyms are used. Ethnicity was self-described rather than selected from predefined categories.

Poppy was aged, 17 of mixed heritage (Ghanaian Irish) and had an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) in a mainstream school. SS was aged 17, Caribbean English, also had diagnoses of dyslexia, anxiety, and ADHD, and had exam access arrangements in a mainstream school. Maia was 17 years old, South American Caribbean, also had an ADHD diagnosis, and had an EHCP in a mainstream school and several alternative provisions. Lily was aged 16, of mixed heritage (European Caribbean) and was home educated between school years 4 and 11 following attendance at a mainstream school; Lily now receives Special Educational Needs (SEN) support in a home education hub.

Participant recruitment

A recruitment poster was shared on the researcher's social media platforms and disseminated by followers. Interested individuals who met the inclusion criteria were invited to email for further information, including the information sheet and consent form. Despite broad outreach, recruitment proved difficult, possibly due to the anxiety and vulnerability Autistic individuals might feel when asked to verbally share personal experiences due to social communication differences and neurotypical expectations. This challenge is heightened for individuals with multiple marginalised identities, who may have greater mistrust of research or institutions. Consequently, only four participants who met the criteria were recruited.

Data collection

The four participants were interviewed using semi-structured, non-directive methods, which allow for flexible, open-ended responses to collect rich qualitative data (Braun et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2022). Interviews were conducted online via Zoom to balance accessibility, safeguarding, and participant comfort, particularly given the sensitive and identity-focused nature of the conversations. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interview questions were developed following Smith et al. (2022) guidelines.

Two pilot interviews were conducted with neurodivergent girls who met all criteria except for identifying as Autistic or having a diagnosis. However, both girls' parents reported social communication difficulties identified through other diagnostic assessments. These informal trial interviews informed refinements to the interview guide, including simplifying language, adjusting for literal interpretations, and incorporating additional prompts to better support accessible and reflective responses. Their data were not included in the final analysis.

Data analysis (Kaleidoscope Analysis)

Kaleidoscope Analysis is a conceptual framework shaped by metaphor, using multiple interpretive lenses (IPA, intersectionality, and DisCrit) to explore how individual experience reflects and is shaped by sociocultural structures (Nelson, 2024; see Figure 1). Much like a kaleidoscope, which produces evolving patterns through repeated reflections within a fixed structure, this approach begins with focused exploration of personal experience, then rotates towards broader societal influences. As lenses interact, dynamic configurations emerge, revealing how identity, ableism, and racism intertwine across lived contexts. This layered method supports deeper interpretation, aligns with Smith et al. (2022) multi-level framework, and strengthens authenticity by attending to both visible and unseen influences on experience.

In line with this framework, the analysis began with the IPA of the girls' data to address research question 1. IPA involves an iterative and inductive cycle that is flexible yet maintains a focus on how participants make sense of their experiences within specific contexts (Smith et al., 2022). Analysis began with the reflective, meaning-making perspective of the participants' lifeworld. The IPA analytical process involved seven steps (Smith et al., 2022):

- Transcribing interviews using Zoom, reviewing for errors, and note reflections.
- Conducting line-by-line analysis in Word with exploratory, linguistic, and conceptual annotations.
- Distilling data into Experiential Statements, balancing description and interpretation.
- Organising statements into clusters manually.
- Naming clusters as Personal Experiential Themes (PETs).
- Applying the process to other cases.
- Synthesising PETs into Group Experiential Themes (GETs), highlighting similarities and differences across participants.

The second stage examined the multiple socially constructed aspects of the girls' identity and their influence on their individual experiences, while also considering the impact of structural racism, misogyny, and ableism to answer the second research question. Given IPA's idiographic commitment, findings related to question 2 are presented in the discussion section to preserve participant voice free from imposed theoretical framing.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Tavistock Research and Ethics Committee (TREC) on 5 April 2023.

Participants received information sheets and consent forms detailing the study and withdrawal rights, with consent following the "Gillick competence" principle (Health Research Authority, 2024). The participants' understanding of these processes were confirmed at the start of each interview. Steps were taken to safeguard anonymity. Questions were framed to balance emotional risks with benefits, and support organisations were listed participant information sheets. Autism-informed approaches were used to avoid

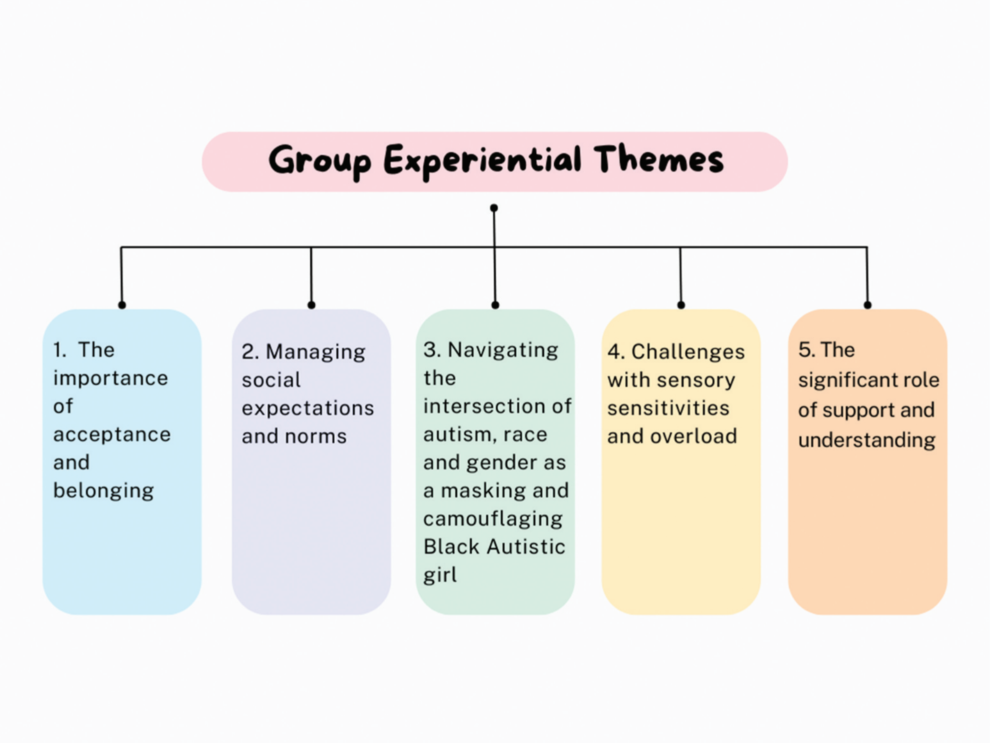

Figure 2. Group Experiential Themes.

projecting neurotypical ideals; these included offering adjustments, including turning off cameras, taking breaks, meeting beforehand, having a support person present, and providing interview questions in advance to minimise anxiety (Davies et al., 2023). Safeguarding and disclosures were managed in line with current ethical and legal guidelines.

All participants gave written consent to participate, and additional informed consent for publication of the research was provided by participants.

Findings

Five Group Experiential Themes (GETs) emerged from analysing the data, revealing shared coping strategies and nuanced complexities in their experiences (see Figure 2 for themes).

Theme 1: The importance of acceptance and belonging

This theme centred on the intersubjective nature of the girls' experiences. All girls discussed feeling rejected and excluded. They highlighted their embodied emotional distress response to how they perceived others viewed them.

Maia's experiences of rejection and isolation were influenced by school practices of isolation, exclusion, and relocation to alternative settings. The repeated nature of negative comments "coming back" to Maia suggests a continuous attack on her self-concept during her formative years. It seems Maia felt ostracised for her authentic self-expression:

> I actually got called mentally ill by a lot of the people in my school [. . .] they'd be like, Maia, you're actually mentally ill. That's the type of names that used to come back to me when I was younger, just because I used to express myself.

Poppy's account reveals a sense of alienation and struggle with self-identity. This led to emotional masking, a coping mechanism that proved detrimental to her self-worth and mental health. This deterioration highlighted the severity of her psychological distress:

> I was put in inpatients for like six months [. . .] I just thought I was really weird and that like my brain didn't work properly [. . .] I had never ever seen, like, a like Black Autistic girl [. . .] and I like self-harmed and stuff like that. I did that consistently [. . .] from age twelve [. . .] I did not cope with it well [. . .] it caused me loads of mental problems, like it gave me depression and like anxiety.

Poppy's emphasis on never seeing someone like herself underscores the importance of representation and its impact on self-perception and identity formation.

All girls were diagnosed with autism between ages 11–17, gaining a measure of clarity and self-acceptance. Their experiences of acceptance and belonging seemed less reliant on how they felt others perceived them once they were diagnosed. It seems that on reflection, they recognised they were masking and the negative consequences:

> I feel like if you're not your true self, then you won't ever really know who you are [. . .] That's how you can kind of fall down into the path of feeling, like I said, ugly, not loved, not like all of these things, cause you're masking up all your behaviours, you're not being yourself to people that you feel like are meant to love you.

Theme 2: Managing social expectations and norms

The girls' accounts collectively paint a picture of the often draining nature of managing social expectations, leading them to mask and camouflage their true selves to fit in and maintain friendships.

Maia's experience reveals a complex interaction between self-perception and social positioning. Her description of being "the weird one" among popular kids suggests a simultaneously present yet disconnected social existence. The pause in her speech when describing this might suggest some reflection or discomfort, indicating the emotional weight of this sense of self:

> I was just the weird one that hung out with the popular kids. Because there's always that one that's kind of like (pause) there but they're not really there, and that was me.

Lily's comparison of socialising to "fighting for my life" delivers an intense, almost primal struggle for social acceptance. The cyclical nature of these interactions, followed by periods of recovery, suggests a pattern of emotional and physical depletion. Lily's expression of inability to "catch up" implies a perceived gap between her capabilities and social expectations, highlighting the exhausting nature of masking:

> I used to find like hanging out with them like fighting for my life [. . .] I can never really live up to any expectations because I was just like, mentally and physically I wouldn't be able to catch up with things.

SS' self-description as a "people pleaser" reveals a prioritisation of others' needs over her own. The "act" she mentions putting on for friends indicates a conscious performance of expected social behaviours. Her exhaustion suggests the psychological labour of chronic social masking:

> I was such a people pleaser, and I just wanted my friends to like me [. . .] after I hung out [. . .] with my friends, I would just come home and be very exhausted, because I've kind of just felt like I was putting on this sort of act, I suppose

Theme 3: navigating the intersection of autism, race, and gender as a masking and camouflaging black Autistic girl

All girls described facing racism, ableism and sexism from peers and teaching staff through microaggressions, harassment, and abuse. Experiences of support were limited, compounded by judgement and lack of acceptance from the Black community.

Maia emphasised that her Blackness was the most prominent aspect of her identity to others:

> Before they see the autism, they're always going to see my race. I thought this is why it's really different to be Black and Autistic, than White and Autistic.

Lily faced racial microaggressions that appeared intended to communicate the perceived inferiority of her skin colour:

> . . . we were acting like it was a butterfly [. . .] I put my hand out [. . .] they were like it wouldn't like wanna go on your skin, they don't like brown skin

Lily endured constant racial microaggressions about her hair, which led to emotional distress:

> . . . oh, your hair smells because I could have product in it, but they weren't used to the same product [. . .] so I think there was one time I just turned red, and I screamed, and I started crying

Lily's response was later described by her teacher as bad behaviour. Lily's account of racial microaggressions targeting her hair, and the subsequent misinterpretation of her distress as "bad behaviour" illustrates how racism and ableism intersect. It reveals how neurotypical expectations, and racial stereotypes can compound misunderstanding and marginalisation of Autistic Black girls.

Poppy's description of daily racial microaggressions exposes the pervasive racism in her school environment. Being compared to "black dirt" reveals deeply ingrained prejudice and the emotional toll of ongoing dehumanisation:

> If they saw like black dirt anywhere, they'd be like, that's you, like you're going on the table or like if there was like, I don't know, something like a black poster they're like, oh, you're getting all over the posters like it's meant to be a white background.

The shared experiences regarding the "angry Black girl" stereotype reveal a critical intersection of race, gender, and autism. Lily's reflection on this stereotype being "damaging" for Autistic Black girls demonstrates an acute awareness of how societal prejudices can mask or misinterpret Autistic traits, particularly in expressions of distress.

> With a lot of Black girls, it's kind of like you're more masculine - that like loads of people just see you as that way so when you're like sharing [. . .] signs of [. . .] distress it's like oh she's just being like you know typically angry and all of that stuff which (pause) it's like it's such a damaging stereotype especially when you're like Autistic.

Poppy's reflection on how her interest-driven communication style was perceived negatively due to racial biases highlights the unique challenges faced by Black Autistic individuals:

> If I'm talking about something I have a lot of interest in, then that's like some of the only times that my voice tone changes or like [. . .] I talk faster. Like just cause I'm passionate about it [. . .] But like people are like, oh I'm not arguing with you.

Poppy's explanation of her vocal tone and passion for social justice may reflect her autism. If this were better understood, her peers may have reacted differently. Her discussion on colonialism added a racial dimension, as it challenges White individuals to confront the historical context of white superiority and privilege (McIntosh, 1988).

SS recounted her deputy headteacher's defence of use of the N-word by a teacher and peer, and rejecting her Black history initiative, a stance she found shocking given his Black identity and leadership role:

> I wanted to start a Black history club when I was in like, Year eight. I went to him, and he said, no, because he said that it's gonna offend some people or make people feel some type of way [. . .] it was the same deputy head teacher for all of these situations.

Theme 4: Challenges with sensory sensitivities and overload

Sensory sensitivities and overload caused the girls significant discomfort, emotional distress, and physical exhaustion. Their experiences reveal a complex interplay between sensory input, social interaction, and self-perception, shaped by their intersecting identities as Black Autistic girls. These invisible struggles are intensified by neurotypical norms and racialised, gendered biases.

SS encountered daily sensory discomfort in school. The intersubjective nature of this experience is highlighted by her peers' reactions, labelling her as "emotional" or a "basket case", revealing a profound misunderstanding of Autistic experiences in neurotypical-dominated spaces.

> It's always loud, because there's just a bunch of different students just running and just making a bunch of noise [. . .] It was just loud, and I couldn't even, couldn't focus on what was happening. I needed my headphones [. . .] I didn't know what that was at the time, I just thought I was just like - it was just loud. And everything was just a bit too much.

The school environment left Lily exhausted and feeling like she was "failing", reflecting the internalisation of societal norms. This sense of personal inadequacy may have hindered her ability to seek support, highlighting how societal expectations can shape self-perception and limit self-advocacy:

> It's so demanding for me and next I feel like I'm failing, but I don't know how to ask for that help.

Poppy describes struggling with the texture of her hair, describing it as "knotty". Her desire for straight, flowing hair reflects both internalised societal beauty standards based on Whiteness and sensory aversion to her hair texture:

> No one had hair like me, and I wanted my hair to like flow down. Rather than being puffed up, like it would just never work. But when I did, people would just put their hands in it.

Poppy did not observe similar interactions at her school, leaving her confused about the social dynamics. The combination of a racial microaggression, the unpredictability of the act, and her sensory sensitivities created a disempowering experience, especially for a Black Autistic individual. This highlights how overlapping identities can compound one's experiences.

Theme 5: The significant role of support and understanding

The girls' narratives reveal how understanding, advocacy, and appropriate accommodations from family, friends, and educators significantly influenced their experiences and outcomes. Simultaneously, they highlight the ongoing challenges and misconceptions they faced, emphasising the need for broader societal understanding and institutional change.

Maia's account of her mother's advocacy against isolation shows the crucial role parents play in challenging marginalising school practices. She described her mother's "fight for me", suggesting an ongoing struggle against systemic barriers, signalling what often becomes an adversarial nature of advocating for Autistic children in educational settings:

> My mum wasn't really happy about me being in isolation. I don't think any parent would be. So yes, my mum was always trying to fight for me not to be in isolation.

The value placed on neurodivergent friendships by SS and Lily, and Maia's appreciation of her best friend's understanding, emphasises the importance of peer relationships that offer validation and acceptance:

> The friend group I have now, most of us are neurodivergent. So, we all kind of, are aware of each other's needs.

Maia's description of her friend providing both empathy and different perspectives suggests a nuanced understanding of supportive friendships, where validation coexists with gentle challenges on one's viewpoint:

> She's just really sympathetic to me like she always understands me to a T [. . .] I think that's what's really nice about it is that she validates my feelings, but then also gives me a different perspective of a situation.

In the educational context, Maia and Lily's experiences with supportive teaching staff highlight the significant impact individual educators had on their well-being. The emphasis on having "somebody to talk to" demonstrates the importance of emotional support and safe spaces within the school environment.

Poppy's reflection on the misunderstanding of diverse autism presentations exposes a critical gap in societal awareness. Her use of the term "crazy" to describe others' perceptions illustrates the harmful misconceptions that can arise from limited understanding of autism:

> They just think [. . .] you're just crazy [. . .] most people don't even know that there's autism that is not like, that doesn't affect you like on an intellectual level. So, people don't even know that ASD is even the thing half the time.

Summary of findings

The findings highlight the nuanced, intersectional experiences of Black Autistic girls navigating UK education. Feelings of acceptance and belonging were central, yet experiences of racism, ableism, and sexism, contributed to rejection, isolation, and reduced engagement with learning. Navigating unspoken social norms, particularly in the absence of explicit guidance, led to confusion and distress, especially when Autistic social differences were misinterpreted.

Many participants experienced improved self-understanding post-diagnosis, which sometimes led to greater peer acceptance and self-expression. Support and understanding emerged as crucial factors. Supportive family, friends, and some individual staff members acted as protective factors, providing adjustments, care, and empathy. This highlights the positive impact individuals can have within challenging systems and underscores the influence of positive intersubjectivity on individual experiences

Discussion

In keeping with the Kaleidoscope Analysis framework, this discussion examines the girls' lived experiences through a DisCrit lens, incorporating intersectionality theory for broader societal-level insights, answering research question 2. The experiences of Black Autistic girls who mask and camouflage are impacted by unequal power dynamics, shaped by the social constructs of Whiteness and ability as normative cultural standards (Annamma et al., 2016).

Within the current study, the concepts of masking and camouflaging are not regarded as separate themes but are understood as dynamic responses to the intersecting societal pressures experienced by Black Autistic girls. The Kaleidoscope Analysis framework (Nelson, 2024) foregrounds the complexity of these lived experiences, illustrating how the girls' experiences of masking are shaped by racialised, gendered, and ableist expectations in educational spaces, and thus reflect how these identities are co-constructed and negotiated.

This study argues that to disentangle masking from the intersection of autism, race and gender would be to overlook the meaning of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989). Masking is not merely an individual adaptation; masking functions as a form of survival and visibility management arising from broader sociocultural demands. Separating masking from these intersecting identities would risk losing the core insight of intersectionality that identity is always negotiated at multiple, overlapping axes. Thus, the Kaleidoscope Analysis (Nelson, 2024) framework enables a nuanced appreciation of how societal norms and expectations are internalised and responded to through everyday practices of self-presentation and adaptation.

Acceptance and belonging

The girls' narratives highlight how their perceptions of acceptance and belonging in educational settings influenced their masking and camouflaging behaviours, aligning with previous studies (Chapman, 2020; Hull et al., 2017; Tierney et al., 2016). Autistic masking is often a response to bullying, rejection, and the desire to fit in (Bargiela et al., 2016; Chapman, 2020; Tierney et al., 2016). Similarly, Black people often assimilate in White-majority spaces to cope with racism and fit in (Lewis & Arday, 2023). The girls described navigating both simultaneously, a toxic fusion of racism and neurotypical hegemony (Fierros & Conroy, 2002).

One of the girls experienced conditional acceptance when she received more support than a Black peer due to perceived higher intelligence. This illustrates inequities in resource allocation and highlights how claims to ability can confer economic advantages (Annamma et al., 2016). It also demonstrates the complexity of intersectionality, where societal structures maintain disparities through the interaction of factors such as race, neurodiversity, and perceived ability – not just along a single axis of identity. This prompts consideration of how broader societal structures contribute to the persistence of social inequalities, even within systems ostensibly designed to support and educate all students equally.

The role of societal structures in maintaining social inequalities

Skinner-Dorkenoo et al. (2023) argue that societal systems across multiple levels reinforce and produce individual biases. Historically, systems and structures have maintained power hierarchies and marginalisation (Fenton & Smith, 2016). Psychology has contributed to this by creating disorders specifically for subordinated groups: women were diagnosed with "hysteria" (Tasca et al., 2012); enslaved Black people who escaped were said to have "drapetomania" (White, 2002; Willoughby, 2018) and homosexuality and transgender identity were classified as disorders (Ewing, 2020; Zucker & Spitzer, 2005). These historical constructs have not only shaped cultural scripts but also inform contemporary expectations of "normalcy", especially within education.

This legacy is echoed in the girls' narratives, for example, their expressions of feeling compelled to suppress or reshape their authentic expressions to avoid being misinterpreted or excluded. Their experiences of masking, performed in response to racialised, gendered, and neurotypical norms, reflect broader systems of visibility management rooted in historical patterns of control and classification. As Annamma et al. (2016) argue within DisCrit, access to privilege often depends on proximity to Whiteness and perceived behavioural conformity. The girls' accounts show how this structural entrenchment persists, shaping how identity is read, regulated, and sometimes erased in school contexts. This historical entrenchment of marginalisation not only shaped economic privileges but also set the stage for the broader mechanisms of power and control that Foucault explores in his concept of governmentality.

Foucault posits that governmentality, the dynamics of power, control, and governance, extends beyond state politics, influencing how institutions, including schools, regulate behaviour and allocate resources (Foucault, 1988). In education, this can be observed through misdiagnosis and missed diagnosis of need, especially in marginalised groups (Diemer et al., 2022; Giwa-Onaiwu, 2016). Power is derived from established knowledge and accepted truths, yet these marginalised groups frequently lack the ability to define their own narratives, affecting their access to support (Foucault, 1988; Held, 2020). This was evident in the participant data: SS was perceived as "troubled" rather than recognised as having sensory and learning needs; Maia and SS saw neurodivergent peers punished for behaviours like stimming, and Poppy's autism was only identified after inpatient admission, where staff had relevant training.

Whiteness and ability are upheld as societal norms, perpetuated by media and institutional power (Johnson, 2017). These structures grant unspoken privileges to those who align with them, while normalising and obscuring systemic inequality. Without systemic explanations for inequality, individuals may internalise these hierarchies and resist acknowledging their privilege, often responding with denial (DiAngelo, 2018; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021). Discussions about inequality can therefore be silenced to protect the status quo. The girls' stories reflect this dynamic, illustrating how institutional biases are experienced and navigated daily, and how silence and denial shape both understanding and response to injustice.

Reproduction of social inequalities within UK education

In school, these power dynamics appear through behaviour policies grounded in neurotypical norms. The Timpson Review (2019) found that Autistic individuals and those identified as having special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are disproportionately excluded from school. Neurotypical behaviour policies and staff's lack of understanding contribute to Autistic students' vulnerability to being misunderstood and sanctioned. The girls' data showed experiences of punishment for neurodivergent behaviours and repeated school exclusions.

All participants reported being labelled as aggressive or having an attitude, often due to teachers' misinterpretation of unmet learning needs. This reflects what Annamma et al. (2016) describe as the influence of normative cultural standards, which position certain students as deficient when they do not conform to dominant expectations. Labelling by both staff and peers reinforced racialised and neurotypical perceptions of behaviour.

Stereotyping played a key role in sustaining these power hierarchies. The girls described how racial assumptions led to their emotional distress being dismissed, echoing Corbett and Perepa's (2007) findings that stereotyping and inadequate services hinder appropriate support for racially marginalised groups. Lily found this particularly damaging, explaining that while emotional distress is common in Autistic individuals, her autism was often overlooked because of her race.

Whiteness and oppression as a context for responses to sensory overload

Elliott (2016) asserts that white supremacy promotes dissociation from the body, prioritising thinking over feeling and disregarding bodily signals. Berila (2016) highlights that oppressing and dehumanising others necessitates dissociation from embodied experiences, making it easier to harm them. Paradoxically, this process dehumanises the oppressor (Hook, 2008). Consequentially, sensory responses are misunderstood by the neuro-majority as they deviate from perceptions of normativity.

This framing helps explain why Autistic sensory needs are often misinterpreted. SS was called a "basket case", Poppy was labelled "crazy", and Lily's sensory-driven hugs were seen as aggression. Misunderstood sensory needs led to masking, stress, and anxiety which resulted in missing school and hospitalisation due to deteriorating mental health in Poppy's case. Caldwell (2017) explains that children lose their sense of self when their feelings are invalidated; they begin to distrust their bodily signals when their expressions of negative feelings are rejected. This demonstrates the detrimental impact on Autistic bodies when their sensory environment is not adapted, and their authentic expression is suppressed, which could be linked to alexithymia (difficulty identifying feelings). Alexithymia is known to have a higher prevalence in Autistic individuals (Poquérusse et al., 2018).

Despite challenges, the girls described supportive relationships with friends, family, and some educators. These positive school experiences highlight how individual efforts can help mitigate systemic barriers and foster environments where Autistic students feel less pressure to mask. This suggests that similar individual actions in other systems and organisations may transcend societal barriers and begin to facilitate environments where Autistic individuals do not feel the need to mask and camouflage.

Reframing practice: implications for educational psychologists

The findings of this study have clear implications for EPs committed to equity, inclusion, and culturally responsive practice. EPs must adopt an intersectional lens, recognising how multiple aspects of identity shape a young person's experience and how others may interpret their behaviour. This requires reflection on their own identities, privileges, and the power dynamics in interactions with children, families, and schools.

EPs are well positioned to challenge deficit-based narratives surrounding neurodiversity, race, gender, and disability. Through consultation, assessment, and training, they can support professionals in understanding how behaviours like masking are contextually shaped rather than inherently oppositional. Reviewing patterns of referral, exclusion, and diagnosis, particularly among Black children and children with SEND, is vital for identifying systemic biases (Timpson, 2019). For example, research detailed in Nelson (2024) illustrates how exclusion data can illuminate institutional disproportionality and how culturally responsive formulation practices can disrupt deficit framings.

In individual meetings, EPs must prioritise relational safety and identity-affirming approaches that recognise the emotional toll of masking within racialised and gendered contexts. This includes co-constructing meaning through narrative-based formulations, resisting pathologising interpretations of coping strategies, and attending to non-verbal cues that may reflect burnout or misrecognition. These practices do not represent a separate stance for working with masking Black autistic girls but rather embody the broader commitment to equity and reflexivity that should underpin all EP work. As highlighted in Nelson (2024), such sensitivity requires professionals to continually examine how their own assumptions and established systems can contribute to epistemic injustice for marginalised youth.

Continued Professional Development (CPD) using Autistic-informed resources and engagement with the neurodivergent community is essential. EPs can guide schools in reviewing behaviour policies and classroom practices that may inadvertently penalise masking or misinterpret cultural expression. EPs can facilitate school-wide reflection by using tools such as equity audits, and targeted CPD focused on intersectional invisibility and neurodivergent burnout. Marginalised voices must be prioritised in decision-making (Love & Beneke, 2021), and parents must be actively listened to when advocating for their children (AGN, 2022).

Working systemically, EPs can support schools in developing anti-discrimination policy, delivering neurodiversity psychoeducation, and fostering inclusive, empowering organisational cultures. As applied psychologists, EPs are well placed to challenge the silence that maintains inequity. Applying frameworks like DisCrit supports critical reflection on how practice can uphold or disrupt structural inequalities, helping create more inclusive, neuro-affirming environments.

Strengths and limitations of the research

This study's strengths include its innovative intersectional focus on Autistic masking in UK schools and its use of Kaleidoscope Analysis to examine experiences across micro and macro levels. The inclusion of Autistic voices and a neurodivergent researcher added authenticity, while IPA supported transparency and integrity by surfacing and acknowledging researcher biases.

Limitations include the London-based sample, which may not reflect wider UK contexts. All participants communicated verbally with an unfamiliar adult, potentially excluding those who use other communication methods. While some had co-occurring diagnoses, their impact on masking was not fully explored. While IPA values quality over quantity, the small, homogenous sample limits transferability, though findings align with existing research, and readers should therefore consider and assess the relevance of the findings of the current research to their own context.

Future research

Future research should include Autistic young people who use alternative communication methods, such as writing or Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), to ensure broader inclusion. The role of co-occurring conditions like dyslexia, ADHD, hypermobility, and dyspraxia on Autistic experiences warrants further exploration.

Research is needed on masking in younger Autistic children (Years 3–7), as this developmental period was significant for participants. Projective techniques such as drawing the ideal self or ideal school may support research with younger participants (Moran, 2001; Williams, 2014).

Further studies could utilise the Kaleidoscope Analysis framework to examine individual experiences alongside structural and systemic influences. Research should address other marginalised identities, including socioeconomic status, sexuality, gender diversity, religion, and multilingualism.

Conclusion

The experiences of masking and camouflaging Black Autistic girls in UK education are uniquely complex, rooted in a long history of oppression against women, Black people, and disabled communities. These intersecting forces remain embedded in societal structures that define normalcy through Whiteness and ability, shaping school environments where masking becomes a survival strategy. Yet, moments of relational support offered opportunities for self-acceptance and improved well-being.

To address these inequities, structural and systemic change is essential. While Black Autistic girls may hold identities that grant some societal privilege, such as cognitive ability, accent, or education, their experiences remain shaped by the interaction of multiple, often marginalised, identities.

In schools, the girls' Blackness was often foregrounded, shaping how they were perceived and supported. Educational professionals must approach each pupil with curiosity, avoiding assumptions based on socially constructed categories. They should commit to dismantling inequities by listening, empathising, and challenging discriminatory practices. EPs have a vital role in challenging systems, amplifying pupil voice, and driving change towards equity and inclusion.

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Data availability statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available in the University of Essex repository, https://repository.essex.ac.uk/39207/

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