

RISE™
Raising Inclusion Standards for Everyone

What We Heard:

A **thematic analysis** of **RISE With Me Cards**

Toby Watts
Alex Kelly

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION **3**

WHO WE SPOKE TO **3**

THEMATIC FINDINGS **4**

THEME 1: **TRUST, NOT SPECIALISM OR ROLE, DETERMINES COMFORT TO SHARE** 4

THEME 2: **BARRIERS TO A YOUNG PERSON SPEAKING UP** 5

THEME 3: **HOW THE CARDS ADDRESS THE BARRIERS TO TALKING** 5

THEME 4: **RECOGNITION, RELIEF AND SELF-UNDERSTANDING** 6

THEME 5: **OWNERSHIP: YOUNG PEOPLE AS CO-AUTHORS OF THEIR PLAN** 7

THEME 6: **AN ACCESSIBLE WAY TO BUILD STAFF UNDERSTANDING** 7

THEME 7: **GETTING THE TIMING RIGHT** 8

THEME 8: **A CLASSROOM TOOL AND SYSTEM EVIDENCE** 9

SUMMARY **9**

STRENGTHS **10**

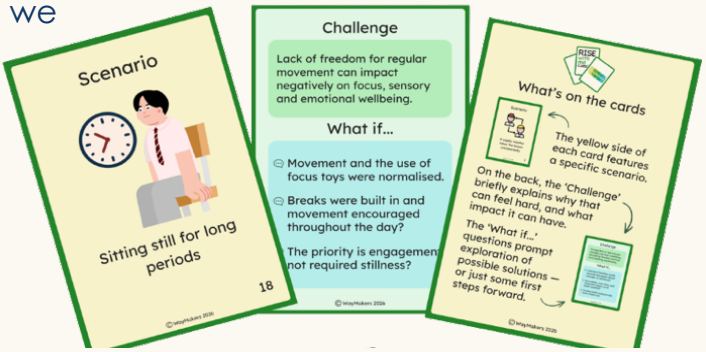
LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS **10**

REFERENCES **10**

INTRODUCTION

RISE With Me Cards is a product designed to build more positive experiences at school. The cards have been co-created by neurodivergent young people and professionals: they capture many neurodivergent experiences, and key questions to help you plan the best ways forward.

This document shares what we found when we looked at whether the cards work the way we hoped. We look at how young people felt using them, what staff in schools made of them, and what type of effect they may have in building more positive experiences at school.



WHO WE SPOKE TO

To understand how the RISE With Me Cards would be used in real-world settings, participants were first given the opportunity to use the cards themselves and were then asked to reflect on their experiences.

Twenty-four individuals took part across 16 conversations (see Table 1), including young people, school staff, parents, mental health practitioners, a neurodivergent specialist mentor, and an educational programme lead. Participants were recruited through our existing networks and professional connections.

Interviews were semi-structured, using a small set of guiding questions to support consistency while allowing participants to shape the direction of the conversation. Conversations were analysed using an inductive thematic approach, identifying recurring patterns across accounts and grounding each theme in participants' own words.

Table 1.

Participant group	Number
Young people (including mainstream, alternative provision, and out-of-school settings)	11
School staff (incl. 3 SENCOs)	7
Parents	2
Mental health practitioners	2
Neurodivergent specialist mentor	1
Educational programme lead	1
Total	***24***

THEMATIC FINDINGS

Eight themes emerged, summarised below with indicative frequencies (distinct coded observations and contributing sources). Given the sample size, frequencies indicate how strongly themes resonated across voices rather than statistical representation. Some themes feature an "Implications for RISE With Me Cards" section. This includes our interpretation of how the cards respond to participant feedback, rather than additional research findings. Some themes also include a "Broader Literature" section, showing where our findings align with existing research.

THEME 1:
Trust, not specialism or role, determines comfort to share

7 coded observations | 5 distinct sources

What we found

For several young people, one relationship carried most of the weight of sharing needs, and shared identity appeared to help trust develop. This means the cards cannot rely on a pre-existing "safe adult"; they need to be usable with whichever member of staff a pupil already trusts, which is frequently someone outside the SEN team.

Quotes

- "If you go to the right person... anyone else is, yeah… can't really talk." — **Young Person (Alternative Provision)**
- "Those two were the only people I could actually go to for help." — **Young Person (Mainstream)**
- "How often is a young person's trusted, comfortable staff member not someone in the SEN base, but their tutor." — **SENCO & Parent**
- "Not just for a certain set of staff, but for staff who generally teach these pupils." — **SENCO & Parent**

Implications for RISE With Me Cards

The cards are designed for any trusted adult, not just SEN staff. By structuring the conversation, they reduce reliance on specialist skills and allow trusted tutors or TAs to support conversations. Choosing a card rather than being questioned directly can also lower the trust threshold, supporting conversations while relationships are still forming.

Broader Literature

This finding is corroborated in the literature on autistic pupils' school experiences. Jacobs et al. (2020) found that communication with teachers was shaped less by role or specialism than by trust, familiarity and feeling understood.

THEME 2:
Barriers to a young person speaking up

9 coded observations | 6 distinct sources

What we found

Several barriers were described: difficulty finding the words, fear of being singled out or shamed, support that disappears at a transition, and promises of help that never happen. Open, unscaffolded questions ("how do you feel?") were often raised as the hardest format to answer. Some are cognitive (word-finding, verbal processing effort), some are social (fear of being singled out, past shaming), and some are systemic (support lost on transition, promised action that never lands).

Quotes

- "My brain is just, it mumbles up... it's hard to talk." — **Young Person (Alternative Provision)**
- "Saying that you're struggling is the hardest part." — **Young Person (Further Education)**
- "The overwhelm itself kind of became secondary to the shaming and punishment I would receive if I did voice these things because nobody actually took it seriously... they'd play in my face and say you're just trying to get out of a lesson." — **Young Person (Autistic Peer Support Group)**

Broader Literature

Autistic young people weigh the risks before speaking up, particularly the possibility of being misunderstood or dismissed (Botha et al., 2020; Josefsson & Taneja Johansson, 2024). When sharing feels unsafe, silence can seem the better option. Research also shows that structured routes for raising concerns are often absent, leaving autistic young people to manage difficulties alone until they escalate (Josefsson & Taneja Johansson, 2024).

THEME 3:
How the cards address the barriers to talking

9 coded observations | 3 distinct sources

What we found

The cards lower the barrier to talking by moving the source of the question from the adult to an object. A pupil can point, slide, or rank the cards, which offers a non-speaking route addressing the difficulty participants reported in finding words for abstract concepts like emotions and sensory sensitivities.

Quotes

- "I could just slide a card across the table — that one, please — instead of saying it out loud." — **Young Person (Further Education)**
- "Give them the cards and say tell me about this, and it all comes out, because they've got a starting point." — **SENCO & Parent**
- "It's not me prompting. It's the cards and me discussing the cards" — **Teaching Assistant (Mainstream)**
- "This can be done without speaking at all." — **SENCO & Parent**
- "I don't think I'm always good at sort of talking about what is annoying... it was easier with the cards." **Young Person (Mainstream)**

Implications for RISE With Me Cards

The cards are also designed to address the social and systemic challenges raised in *theme 2*. Framing problems around the environment rather than the individual is designed to reduce the shame participants described. And because a card sort activity can be completed as a dated record alongside an action plan, it gives a pupil and a receiving school something practical to carry into a transition, offering a partial answer to the loss of support that transitioning students reported.

Broader Literature

Card-based and practical tools that reduce expectations to speak are effective for autistic people. MYSET, a picture-based card-sort tool (Ashburner et al., 2026), was designed to reduce the anxiety of unstructured dialogue by using "mediating objects" to support conversation. Its evaluation showed that the cards helped people express experiences they otherwise found hard to articulate, echoing our participants' accounts.

THEME 4:
Recognition, relief and self-understanding

6 coded observations | 4 distinct sources

What we found

Students often related and recognised themselves in the cards, sometimes for the first time, and this normalised difficulties they had privately treated as personal failings. For one participant it gave them language to challenge how they'd been treated in the past.

Quotes

- "I don't think I actually told anyone I did that until I read that card." — **Young Person (Further Education)**
- "Not a common thing to struggle with those things, but for somebody with ADHD or autism, that it is a common thing." — **Young Person (Further Education)**
- "This is wild, this is revolutionary." — **Young Person (Further Education)**
- *"I'd imagine it's also incredibly validating — 'moving classrooms frequently, I find this really hard, and I've felt like a weirdo for that my whole life' — but here, other people recognise it's a real problem."* — **Young Person (Further Education)**
- *"The card just made me explain loads of stuff about me and then I go, oh, I realised... some of this stuff I really struggle with."* — **Young Person (Mainstream)**

Han et al. (2021) systematic review of 27 studies found that positive reframing can reduce internalised stigma for autistic individuals. Although their review focused on adults, the mechanism aligns with accounts from some young people in our study: when their difficulties are named and normalised, rather than treated as personal failings, they feel safer and more able to speak up.

THEME 5:
Ownership: young people as co-authors of their own plan

5 coded observations | 3 distinct sources

What we found

Young people consistently described the resulting plan as theirs, not something done to them. Some participants also actively weighed their own needs against staff workload, rather than asking for unrealistic accommodations.

Quotes

- "Most of it." (in response to "how much of the plan felt like your ideas?") — **Young Person (Mainstream)**
- "We did it together." — **Young Person (Alternative Provision)**
- ""We think…what would be good for me? What would be useful for the teachers as well... so it doesn't put too much pressure on the teachers, but not too much pressure on me either." — **Young Person (Mainstream)**

THEME 6:
An accessible way to build staff understanding

6 coded observations | 4 distinct sources

What we found

The information on the back of each card was repeatedly described as in-the-moment training for staff who often have very little formal neurodiversity education.

Quotes

- "Here's your neurodiversity CPD (Continuing Professional Development) in a pack of cards" — **SENCO & Occupational Psychologist & Teacher**
- "Insights that they may not otherwise discover through observation, behaviour data or academic information alone" — **Educational Programme Lead (Inclusion)**

Broader Literature

A systematic review of 57 studies on teacher's self-efficacy in educating autistic students found that teachers often lack the confidence due to limited autism-specific professional development. Across studies, autistic students, parents and teachers link this limited understanding of autistic needs to experiences of misunderstanding, exclusion and inadequate provision (Petersson-Bloom & Hansson, 2025).

THEME 7:
Getting the timing right

5 coded observations | 3 distinct sources

What we found

Participants pointed to two separate timing uses: as an early flag before a formal diagnosis or assessment, and as preparation ahead of a known transition such as a new school or course.

Quotes

- "Just being shown these and asked, "does any of this feel like something you experience?" Could be a really good flag that something's going on." — **SENCO & Parent**
- "The secondary school has a huge influx of pupils from lots of different primary schools... this could be used alongside that, almost like a pupil profile." — **Lead Family Support Officer**
- "This would be really helpful for getting the child's input into an initial assessment of need... that's evidence for the assessment, and for a diagnosis or EHCP application." — **SENCO & Parent**

THEME 8:
A classroom tool and system evidence

9 coded observations · 5 distinct sources

What we found

Professionals reported that the cards could scale beyond individual conversations — into EHCP evidence, inclusion-strategy documents, an electronic transition profile, and a repeatable review tool.

Quotes

- "We've got so many new [EHCP applications] and people out of school... this could be positioned as a tool that will help you identify ways to spend that inclusion funding... all schools have got to write an inclusion strategy document by December." — **SENCO & Occupational Psychologist & Teacher Psychologist**

SUMMARY

Across 24 participants and 16 conversations, the thematic analysis revealed insight into the barriers young people face when trying to communicate their needs, and how the RISE With Me cards may help overcome these barriers. Eight themes emerged, each reflecting a different aspect of young peoples lived experience and the practical realities of school support systems.

The first finding was that **sharing needs depends on trust**, not professional role. Several pupils described only being able to talk to one specific adult, often a tutor rather than a SEN specialist, with one noting, *"If you go to the right person… anyone else is, yeah. Can't really talk"* . This means tools must work flexibly with whichever adult a pupil already trusts.

Participants also described **multiple barriers to speaking up**, including word-finding difficulty, fear of being singled out, and support that disappears during transitions. As one pupil put it, *"My brain is just, it mumbles up… it's hard to talk"* . Open questions like "How do you feel?" were consistently described as the hardest to answer.

The cards directly addressed these barriers by **lowering the cognitive and social load of communication**. Pupils emphasised the value of non-verbal routes: *"I could just slide a card across the table — that one, please — instead of saying it out loud"* . Staff noted that because the question comes from the card rather than the adult, young people feel less exposed and more able to express themselves.

A further theme was **recognition and relief**. Many young people reported seeing their experiences reflected in the cards, sometimes for the first time. One described the experience as "*revolutionary*" and "*incredibly validating*". This normalisation helped shift difficulties from personal failings to understandable neurodivergent experiences.

The cards also supported **ownership and co-production**. Young people described the resulting plans as their own. Interestingly, one young person even noted that the process "*doesn't put too much pressure on the teachers*". This suggests an awareness of staff workload and a desire to create realistic and collaborative solutions.

Staff consistently described the cards as **accessible in-the-moment training**, calling them "*your neurodiversity CPD in a pack of cards*". Finally, professionals saw clear **system-level applications**, including EHCP evidence, transition profiles, and inclusion strategy documents.

Overall, the findings suggest that the RISE With Me Cards help young people talk about what's going on for them, make conversations feel safer, give them clearer language for their experiences, and create practical information that schools can use when supporting them across different settings.

STRENGTHS

- A major strength of this analysis is that it includes a mixed group of voices. The sample includes young people from different educational settings, classroom staff, SENCOs, mental health practitioners and more. This allows the findings to show both the depth of lived experience, and a sense of how the cards may work across the wider school system.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

1. Conversations likely favoured participants who could articulate their views readily. Therefore, the research may under-represent those who find it hardest to talk about their experience.
2. Demographic variables (e.g., age, diagnostic status, ethnicity, co-existing health needs) were not collected to maintain anonymity. While ethically appropriate, this constrains the extent to which the findings can be interpreted. As identification, sharing needs and trust in adults can be influenced by a young person's cultural, race and ethnicity, future research should investigate experiences of using the cards by a more ethnically diverse sample.
3. A future direction might be to use longitudinal methods to investigate the effect of the cards on positive experiences and conversations between young people and school staff, as well as staff psychoeducation, over an extended period of time.

References

Ashburner, J., Tomkins, V., Downing, C., Rietberg, E., Hill, J., Copley, J., & Bobir, N. (2026). "My sensory experiences tool": A neurodiversity-affirming therapeutic tool to support the sensory challenges and preferences of autistic children and adults. Occupational Therapy International, 2026(1). https://doi.org/10.1155/oti/4779496

Botha, M., Dibb, B., & Frost, D. M. (2020). 'Autism is me': An investigation of how autistic individuals make sense of autism and stigma. Disability & Society, 37(3), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2020.1822782

Han, E., Scior, K., Avramides, K., & Crane, L. (2021). A systematic review on autistic people's experiences of stigma and coping strategies. Autism Research: Official Journal of the International Society for Autism Research, 15(1), 12–26. https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2652

Jacobs, P., Beamish, W., & McKay, L. (2020). Please listen to us: Adolescent autistic girls speak about learning and academic success. Improving Schools, 24(3), 136548022097311. https://doi.org/10.1177/1365480220973112

Josefsson, H., & Taneja Johansson, S. (2024). Adolescent autistic girls navigating their diagnosis in Swedish secondary school. Frontiers in Education, 9. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2024.1461054

Petersson-Bloom, L., & Hansson, E. (2025). A systematic research review on teachers' self-efficacy in educating autistic students. Autism & Developmental Language Impairments, 10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2396941525139231