

# SOCIAL INCLUSION AND AUTISM IN MAINSTREAM SECONDARY EDUCATION

## WHAT IS NEEDED?

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### Introduction

**School** is not only the place to learn math and grammar. It's also where you interact socially **to reach optimal social development** by adulthood.

**Sense of belonging** is key for social wellbeing & crucial to stay motivated for school (Korpershoek et al., 2020). Thwarted social interactions often leads to school absenteeism (Gubbels et al., 2019).

Attempts to include pupils with autism in mainstream secondary education focused primarily on their educational needs. To make meaningful changes, the **perspectives of autistic pupils is key**.

**Aim:** (1) a deeper understanding to what extent young autistic mainstream secondary pupils experience a sense of belonging and (2) what, according to them, is needed for amelioration.

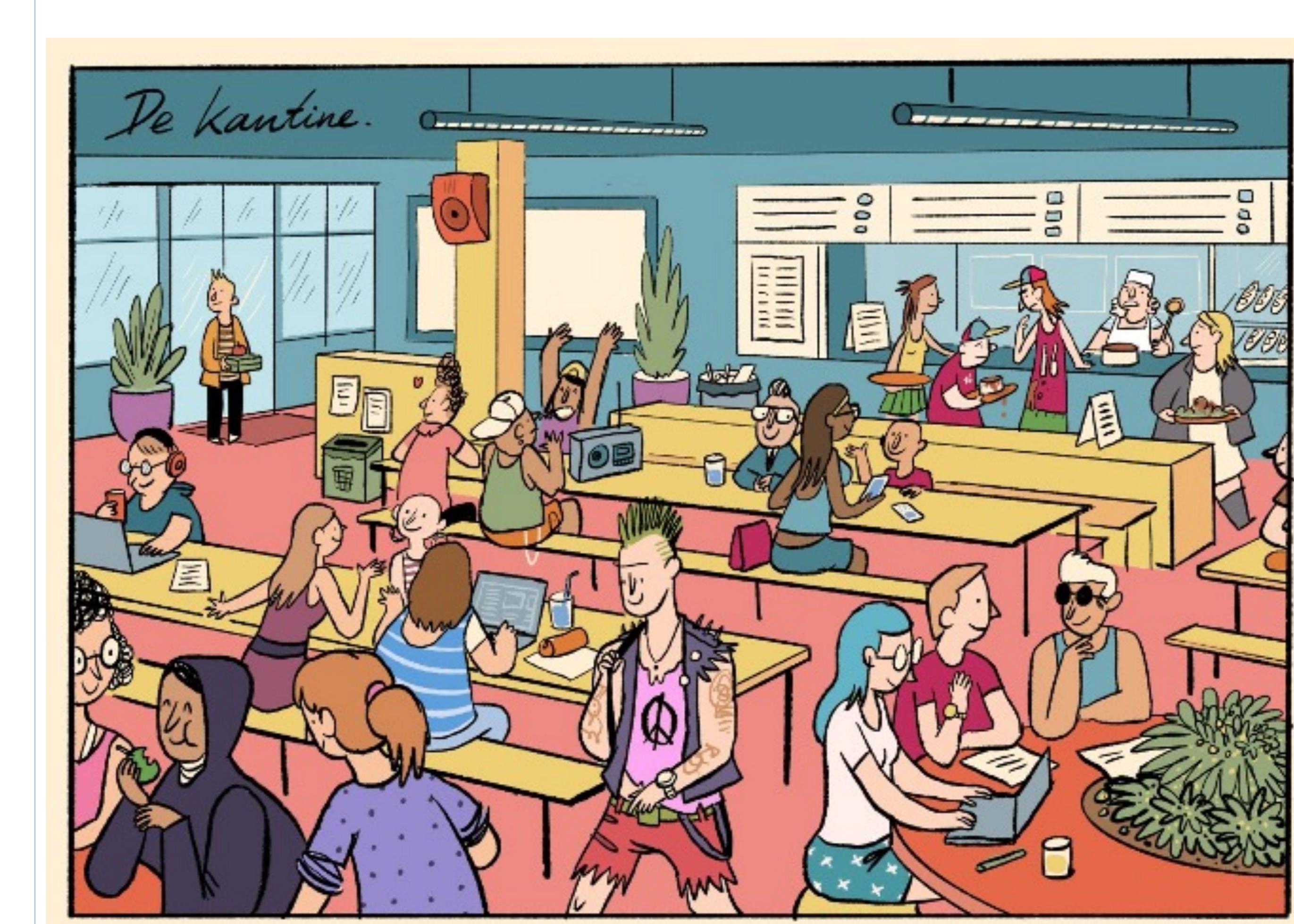


Illustration of a high school cafeteria, designed for the focus group

### Results

#### Autistic pupils reported these 5 themes

- To have little contact with their fellow students, to not belong, and to experience uncomfortable **loneliness**.
- Being alone made them **stand out in a negative way**.
- Most pupils had accepted to be without a friend at school and **made no more effort**. They retained from small talk.
- Breaks were considered extra difficult due to **busy environments** - leading to **sensory overload, fatigue, and stress**.
- Many **avoided breaks** by retreating in classrooms or by skipping school altogether.

*"I don't want to stare at anyone, but I don't know where else to look, which direction."*

*"It was terribly crowded and loud. I didn't eat during the break or anything, I just went outside."*

*"...then I get very restless, and my body is already telling me I have to get out of here for a while, I can't keep it up."*

*"It was really racing to the next classes, and it was very packed and very busy. I found it to be a lot of hassle, heavy bags. It was really a serious overstimulation."*

*"We're not babies, we can challenge ourselves more, they just don't really give us the opportunity."*

### Methods

#### Participants

N = 12 autistic mainstream education pupils (age = 13-19 years).

#### Focus groups

Two focus groups were online. One focus group was at a mental health care facility. Three illustrations of important areas within a high school (schoolyard, cafeteria & hallway) as a topic guide.

#### Analysis

Each focus group took 50-60 minutes and was audiotaped. Verbatim transcripts were analyzed using Thematic analysis.

### Conclusions

**Sense of belonging** and **social inclusion** requires active policies from schools.

**The actual physical (built) school environment** should be examined and adapted to the particular requirements and capacities of all users in order to be able to produce **inclusive environments**.

Only without chronic fatigue or stress at school, other interventions to improve the social inclusion of pupils with autism can be successful.

**Further research within our project** is aimed at obtaining deeper understanding of what a sense of belonging means for autistic pupils and those around them, and how to achieve this while addressing different aspects in the physical (built), social, and cultural environment.

### References

Gubbels, J., van der Put, C. E., & Assink, M. (2019). Risk factors for school absenteeism and dropout: a meta-analytic review. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 48(9), 1637-1667.

Korpershoek, H., Cantrinus, E. T., Fokkens-Bruinsma, M., & de Boer, H. (2020). The relationships between school belonging and students' motivational, social-emotional, behavioural, and academic outcomes in secondary education: A meta-analytic review. *Research Papers in Education*, 35(6), 641-680.