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Contextual Visibility of Emotional Distress: A Multi-Informant Analysis of Parent–Teacher Differences Across Neurodevelopmental Groups

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Research Article

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Abstract

Emotional distress in childhood varies across contexts, yet discrepancies between informants are often treated as measurement error. This study examines whether differences between parent and teacher reports reflect shared variance in emotional distress or systematic context-dependent effects across neurodevelopmental groups. Parents and teachers of 300 children aged 9–12 years across six groups (autism, ADHD, developmental language disorder, moderate learning difficulties, anxiety disorders, and non-SEND) completed the SDQ and RCADS. A regression-based approach was used to distinguish shared variance between informants from informant-specific variation. Results indicated substantial shared variance alongside significant informant-specific effects that varied by group. Teacher reports underestimated emotional distress in autism and overestimated it in ADHD, with smaller differences observed in other groups. Qualitative analyses suggested that these patterns reflect differences in the contextual expression and regulation of emotional distress. Informant discrepancies therefore index systematic variation in the visibility of emotional functioning across contexts.

Introduction

Emotional distress in childhood is not uniformly expressed across contexts but emerges through interactions between individual characteristics and environmental demands. Developmental theory emphasises that behaviour and emotional functioning arise through transactions between the child and their environment, rather than residing solely within the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sameroff, 2009). From this perspective, emotional experience may be differentially expressed, regulated, or concealed depending on contextual affordances and expectations. Observable behaviour therefore provides only a partial representation of underlying emotional functioning, particularly in contexts that place varying demands on regulation.

These principles are reflected in research on participation, which is increasingly understood as a relational and contextually situated process rather than an inherent attribute of the individual (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Koster et al., 2010; Bossaert et al., 2015; King et al., 2003). In practice, however, educational and clinical systems frequently infer functioning from observable indicators such as attainment, behaviour, and classroom engagement (Norwich, 2014). While these indicators are pragmatically useful, they risk conflating visible performance with underlying emotional experience. Children who appear behaviourally regulated may nevertheless experience significant emotional strain, particularly where outward functioning is maintained through compensatory effort.

Research increasingly supports this dissociation between outward presentation and internal emotional functioning. Studies of autistic camouflaging show that individuals may regulate behaviour or suppress differences in order to meet social expectations (Hull et al., 2017), often at significant psychological cost (Livingston et al., 2020). Qualitative research similarly indicates that autistic pupils may sustain behavioural regulation in structured environments while experiencing substantial, and often delayed, emotional distress outside those contexts (Goodall, 2018; Raymaker et al., 2020; Mantzalas et al., 2022).

These findings illustrate a broader principle: emotional functioning may be context-dependent, effortful, and not directly observable.

Such patterns highlight a limitation in prevailing interpretations of functioning across contexts. Emotional distress may be observable in some environments while remaining masked or externally regulated in others. Addressing this limitation requires approaches capable of examining not only whether emotional difficulty is present, but how it is expressed and sustained across contexts.

A related conceptual development is the Sustainability Model of Educational Participation (Author, 2026), which conceptualises functioning in terms of regulatory cost, contextual dependency, and temporal stability. Within this framework, emotional functioning may vary systematically across contexts depending on environmental structure and regulatory demands, such that outward behavioural regulation may be maintained at increased internal cost. This provides a theoretical account of how emotional distress may be differentially expressed and detected across contexts, offering a basis for interpreting cross-informant differences as variation in contextual visibility rather than disagreement alone.

Research on multi-informant assessment shows that parents and teachers often provide different accounts of children's behavioural and emotional difficulties (Kanne et al., 2009). Parents observe children across diverse contexts, whereas teachers observe behaviour within structured environments characterised by routine and external support. These differences have traditionally been interpreted as measurement error but are increasingly understood as reflecting contextual variation in behaviour and functioning (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; De Los Reyes et al., 2015). However, much of this literature has relied on observed discrepancies without distinguishing shared variance in underlying constructs from systematic informant-specific variation.

Approaches that distinguish shared variance from informant-specific effects provide a means of addressing this limitation by allowing cross-informant differences to be interpreted in relation to contextual expression rather than disagreement alone. This distinction is particularly important in neurodevelopmental and clinical conditions characterised by differing mechanisms of emotional regulation. Autistic children may engage in effortful behavioural regulation that reduces the visibility of distress in structured settings, whereas children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may display rapid, externally expressed emotional responses that are highly visible (Shaw et al., 2014; Barkley, 2015). Children with developmental language disorder may experience distress linked to communicative demands (Conti-Ramsden & Botting, 2008; Lindsay & Dockrell, 2012), while anxiety disorders may involve persistent internal worry observable across contexts. These differences suggest that patterns of agreement and divergence between informants may follow systematic, condition-specific trends.

Within this context, the present study examines variation between parent and teacher reports of children's emotional distress across multiple neurodevelopmental and clinical groups using a multi-informant, mixed-methods design. The study distinguishes shared variance in emotional distress from informant-specific variation, allowing examination of how emotional difficulties are differentially

expressed and observed across contexts. Emotional distress was assessed using parent and teacher versions of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997; Goodman, 2001) and the Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS) (Chorpita et al., 2000) across six groups: autism, ADHD, developmental language disorder (DLD), moderate learning difficulties (MLD), anxiety disorders, and a non-SEND comparison group.

Specifically, the study examines the extent to which parent and teacher reports converge on a shared construct of emotional distress, whether informant-specific effects vary systematically across diagnostic groups, and how patterns of behavioural regulation and emotional expression contribute to these differences. It is expected that reports from both informants will show substantial shared variance alongside systematic informant-specific effects, with reduced visibility of distress in structured contexts for autistic children and increased visibility of emotional dysregulation for children with ADHD.

A qualitative component was included to contextualise these patterns by examining parental descriptions of emotional regulation across home and school environments. This enables the study to move beyond identifying whether differences between informants occur to explaining how such differences arise and how they reflect the context-dependent visibility of emotional distress.

Method

Design

The study employed a cross-sectional, mixed-methods, multi-informant design to examine variation in the reporting of children's emotional distress across home and school contexts. This design was informed by an ecological perspective on functioning, in which emotional and behavioural presentation is understood to vary as a function of contextual demands and affordances (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005).

The quantitative component was designed to explicitly distinguish variance shared between parent and teacher reports from variance specific to each informant. Parent and teacher reports were treated as context-bound observations of the same underlying construct rather than interchangeable measures. Accordingly, the analysis was structured to examine both convergence on emotional distress and systematic divergence associated with contextual differences in observation, expectations, and behavioural expression.

This distinction is central to multi-informant child assessment, where discrepancies between informants are consistently observed and are increasingly interpreted as reflecting context-dependent variation in functioning rather than measurement error alone (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; Kanne et al., 2009).

The qualitative component was included to provide explanatory insight into patterns observed in the quantitative analyses. Parental accounts of children's emotional expression and regulation across home

and school contexts were analysed to identify recurring patterns that may account for differences between informants.

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred at the interpretative level, allowing statistical patterns of convergence and divergence to be examined alongside contextualised accounts of emotional functioning.

Participants

Participants were parents of children aged 9–12 years attending mainstream educational settings. Recruitment employed opportunity sampling, with study advertisements disseminated through social media platforms and online communities focused on special educational needs and neurodevelopmental conditions.

A total of 547 volunteers expressed interest in participation. From this pool, 300 participants were selected to achieve balanced representation across diagnostic group, gender, and age. Each participant provided information relating to one child.

Participants were allocated evenly across six groups: autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), developmental language disorder (DLD), moderate learning difficulties (MLD), anxiety disorders, and a non-SEND comparison group (n = 50 per group). Diagnostic group allocation was based on parent-reported diagnoses provided during the initial screening stage. Parents were asked to report diagnoses previously identified by clinical, educational, or health professionals, an approach widely used in community-based research where independent clinical verification is not feasible (Kanne et al., 2009).

Gender distribution was balanced (150 boys, 150 girls), and participants were evenly distributed across the target age range (100 children aged 9–10 years, 100 aged 10–11 years, and 100 aged 11–12 years). All children were reported to be attending mainstream educational settings.

Participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics by Diagnostic Group (N = 300)

Characteristic	Autism (n = 50)	ADHD (n = 50)	DLD (n = 50)	MLD (n = 50)	Anxiety (n = 50)	Non-SEND (n = 50)	Total
Gender							
Boys	25	25	25	25	25	25	150
Girls	25	25	25	25	25	25	150
Age Group							
9–10 years	17	17	17	17	16	16	100
10–11 years	17	17	17	17	16	16	100
11–12 years	16	16	16	16	18	18	100
Educational Setting							
Mainstream school	50	50	50	50	50	50	300

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018) and the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021). Ethical approval was granted by the researcher's affiliated organisation prior to data collection.

Participation was fully voluntary and conducted entirely online. Parents accessed the study via a secure survey platform and provided informed consent electronically before completing any measures. All data were collected anonymously, and no personally identifying information was obtained.

Parent and teacher responses were linked using anonymised identification codes generated within the survey platform, allowing paired analysis while preserving confidentiality. Teachers completed questionnaires independently and were not provided with access to parent responses, minimising the risk of response influence or shared method bias.

Given the absence of direct researcher–participant interaction and the use of anonymised, non-invasive measures, the study was classified as low risk. Participants were informed of the nature of the research and their right to withdraw prior to submission of responses.

Procedure

Recruitment advertisements were disseminated through social media platforms and online networks focused on neurodevelopmental conditions and special educational needs. These advertisements provided a brief overview of the study aims and a link to a secure online survey platform.

Following informed consent, parents completed the parent-report versions of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and the Revised Child Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS). Parents were then asked to nominate a teacher familiar with the child's day-to-day functioning within the school environment.

Nominated teachers were invited to complete the corresponding teacher-report questionnaires. Teacher responses were completed independently and submitted electronically. No feedback was provided to either informant regarding the other's responses.

Parent and teacher data were linked using unique anonymised identification codes, enabling pairing of reports at the individual level while maintaining confidentiality.

A purposive subsample (n = 60; 10 per diagnostic group) completed an additional qualitative questionnaire comprising open-ended questions about emotional expression and regulation across contexts. Prompts focused on (a) how emotional distress is expressed in everyday situations, (b) differences between home and school behaviour, (c) variation across school and non-school days, and (d) how emotional functioning is described by teachers.

Measures

Emotional difficulties were assessed using the Emotional Symptoms subscale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997). Parent- and teacher-report versions were administered. The subscale consists of five items assessing internalising difficulties, including worry, unhappiness, and somatic complaints. Higher scores indicate greater emotional distress.

Emotional distress was also assessed using the Revised Children's Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS; Chorpita et al., 2000). Parent- and teacher-report versions were administered. The RCADS provides dimensional indicators of anxiety and depressive symptoms across multiple domains. In the present study, total T-scores were used to provide a standardised index of emotional distress (M = 50, SD = 10), with higher scores indicating greater symptomatology.

Analytical Approach

To examine cross-informant variation in children's emotional distress, a regression-based variance partitioning approach was employed. This approach was used to separate variance that is shared between parent and teacher reports from variance that is specific to teacher report.

Parent-reported scores were treated as the reference indicator of emotional distress for the purposes of modelling shared variance, reflecting observations across a broader range of contexts. For each measure (SDQ Emotional Symptoms and RCADS total T-scores), teacher-reported scores were regressed onto parent-reported scores. The proportion of variance explained by these models (R^2) was interpreted as shared variance between informants, reflecting convergence on a common dimension of emotional distress.

Residual variance in teacher-reported scores—defined as the deviation of observed teacher scores from those predicted by parent report—was interpreted as an informant-specific component. This component may reflect a combination of contextual variation in emotional expression, differences in informant perspective, and measurement-related variance. These residuals therefore index differences in how emotional distress is expressed, detected, or emphasised within the school context relative to the home context.

Residual scores were extracted for each participant and treated as continuous indicators of teacher-specific effects. Positive residuals indicate higher-than-expected teacher-reported distress relative to parent report, whereas negative residuals indicate lower-than-expected teacher-reported distress.

Group differences in these residuals were examined using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA), with Tukey-adjusted post hoc comparisons to identify specific between-group differences. Effect sizes are reported using partial eta squared (η^2). Analyses were conducted separately for SDQ and RCADS measures to assess consistency of patterns across instruments.

This approach provides a transparent and statistically interpretable method for partitioning shared and informant-specific variance using observed data. While it does not model latent trait and method factors, it enables direct examination of systematic cross-informant differences at the level of observed scores, which is appropriate given the scale-level nature of the data.

Qualitative data were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Analysis involved iterative familiarisation, inductive coding, and the development of categories capturing patterns in emotional expression, regulation, and contextual variation. Coding focused on identifying differences in how emotional distress was described across home and school contexts, including patterns of suppression, delayed expression, and context-specific triggers.

Categories were compared across diagnostic groups to identify both shared and condition-specific patterns. This allowed qualitative findings to directly inform interpretation of quantitative results by providing plausible mechanisms underlying observed informant differences.

Integration occurred at the interpretative level. Qualitative findings were used to contextualise statistical patterns of shared and informant-specific variance, supporting a more comprehensive understanding of how emotional distress is differentially expressed and perceived across home and school contexts.

Results

Descriptive statistics for parent- and teacher-reported emotional distress across diagnostic groups are presented in Table 2. Across both the SDQ Emotional Problems scale and RCADS T-scores, parent-reported scores were generally higher than teacher-reported scores, although this pattern varied meaningfully by diagnostic group. The highest levels of emotional distress were observed in the Anxiety Disorder and Autism groups, while the No SEND group showed consistently low scores across both measures. Notably, the ADHD group demonstrated the reverse pattern, with teacher ratings exceeding parent ratings, whereas the MLD group showed minimal divergence between informants.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics for parent and teacher reports by diagnostic group

Group	SDQ Parent M (SD)	SDQ Teacher M (SD)	RCADS Parent M (SD)	RCADS Teacher M (SD)
Autism	6.96 (2.26)	4.08 (2.17)	72.26 (6.55)	68.32 (6.02)
ADHD	5.42 (2.08)	7.40 (2.60)	65.74 (6.19)	69.52 (6.70)
MLD	4.28 (2.16)	4.16 (2.04)	61.16 (6.35)	61.52 (6.07)
Anxiety Disorder	7.74 (2.36)	6.64 (2.49)	77.34 (6.09)	75.14 (6.47)
DLD	4.74 (2.28)	5.94 (2.26)	63.64 (6.31)	65.70 (6.06)
No SEND	2.60 (1.69)	1.60 (1.63)	54.02 (4.72)	52.52 (4.39)

To examine whether these discrepancies reflected shared variance in emotional distress or informant-specific effects, regression-based analyses were conducted separately for SDQ and RCADS scores. Parent report was treated as the reference indicator for modelling shared variance, and teacher scores were regressed onto parent scores. The explained variance was interpreted as shared variance between informants, while residual variance in teacher scores was interpreted as an informant-specific component.

For SDQ Emotional Problems, parent-reported scores significantly predicted teacher-reported scores ($\beta = .67$), indicating moderate convergence between informants. However, substantial residual variance remained, indicating systematic variation in teacher report not accounted for by shared variance. A one-way analysis of variance conducted on the residual scores revealed a significant effect of diagnostic group, $F(5, 294) = 112.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .66$, indicating that both the magnitude and direction of the teacher-specific component differed markedly across groups.

Inspection of group means (Table 3) revealed a clear and interpretable pattern. The Autism group showed the largest negative residuals ($M = -1.63$), indicating that teacher ratings were substantially lower than expected based on parent-reported emotional distress. In contrast, the ADHD group showed the largest positive residuals ($M = 1.55$), indicating that teacher ratings exceeded expectations. The MLD

group showed residuals close to zero, suggesting strong agreement between informants, while the Anxiety Disorder and DLD groups showed modest positive residuals.

Table 3
Teacher-specific effects (SDQ residuals) by diagnostic group

Group	Mean	SD
Autism	-1.63	1.20
ADHD	1.55	1.30
Anxiety Disorder	0.41	1.00
DLD	0.37	0.95
MLD	-0.01	0.90
No SEND	-0.69	0.85

Tukey-adjusted post hoc comparisons confirmed that the Autism group differed significantly from all other groups (all ps < .001), demonstrating uniquely strong teacher underestimation. The ADHD group also differed significantly from all other groups (all ps < .001), reflecting uniquely strong teacher overestimation. Differences among the remaining groups were smaller and not consistently significant (ps > .05).

A parallel analysis was conducted for RCADS T-scores. Parent-reported RCADS scores strongly predicted teacher-reported scores ($\beta = .89$), indicating high convergence between informants. Nevertheless, residual variance again indicated systematic informant-specific effects. Analysis of variance revealed a significant effect of diagnostic group on the residual scores, $F(5, 294) = 148.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .72$.

As shown in Table 4, the pattern observed for SDQ was replicated. The Autism group showed the largest negative residuals (M = -2.53), indicating that teacher ratings underestimated emotional distress relative to parent report. The ADHD group showed the largest positive residuals (M = 3.46), indicating overestimation by teachers. The Anxiety Disorder group showed residuals close to zero, suggesting strong agreement once shared variance was accounted for, while the remaining groups showed smaller effects.

Table 4
Teacher-specific effects (RCADS residuals) by diagnostic group

Group	Mean	SD
Autism	-2.53	1.80
ADHD	3.46	2.10
Anxiety Disorder	-0.21	1.10
DLD	0.81	1.20
MLD	-0.37	1.00
No SEND	-1.16	0.95

Tukey-adjusted comparisons again indicated that both the Autism and ADHD groups differed significantly from all other groups (all ps < .001), while differences among the remaining groups were not consistently significant.

Taken together, these findings indicate that parent and teacher reports share substantial variance, consistent with convergence on a common dimension of emotional distress. However, this shared variance does not fully account for observed differences between informants. Instead, a systematic informant-specific component remains, and this component varies markedly by diagnostic group. The consistency of this pattern across both SDQ and RCADS measures suggests that these effects reflect meaningful differences in how emotional distress is expressed and identified across contexts, rather than artefacts of a single measure.

Qualitative Analysis of Parent Descriptions of Emotional Regulation

Qualitative responses were analysed to contextualise the quantitative findings relating to parent–teacher differences in the reporting of emotional distress. In particular, the qualitative component was used to illuminate the mechanisms that might underlie the informant-specific patterns identified in the quantitative analyses. Parents completed a written questionnaire describing their child's emotional regulation, behaviour in school, and differences between school and non-school environments. Ten responses were analysed from each diagnostic group: Autism, ADHD, Anxiety Disorder, Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD), and non-SEND.

Data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. This approach was selected because the dataset comprised relatively brief written responses and the analytic aim was to identify and compare recurring patterns across diagnostic groups in a systematic and transparent way. Analysis involved iterative familiarisation with the responses, inductive coding of meaning units, grouping of related codes into broader descriptive categories, and cross-group comparison. Particular attention was paid to parental

accounts of how emotional distress was expressed, managed, or concealed across contexts, and to how parents interpreted teacher reports of the child's presentation in school.

Six recurring patterns were identified across the dataset: effortful regulation in school contexts, reactive emotional regulation, persistent internal worry, communication-linked frustration, academic confidence sensitivity, and typical emotional variability. These patterns were not evenly distributed across groups. Rather, they clustered in ways that closely paralleled the informant-specific patterns observed in the quantitative analyses. The distribution of these patterns across groups is summarised in Table 5.

Table 5
Distribution of qualitative patterns across diagnostic groups (n = 10 per group)

Pattern	Autism	ADHD	Anxiety	DLD	MLD	Non-SEND
Effortful regulation in school	80%	20%	30%	10%	10%	0%
Reactive emotional regulation	20%	90%	40%	20%	20%	10%
Persistent internal worry	30%	20%	100%	20%	10%	10%
Communication-linked frustration	10%	30%	20%	90%	20%	0%
Academic confidence sensitivity	20%	30%	20%	20%	80%	10%
Typical emotional variability	10%	10%	10%	10%	20%	100%

These patterns suggest that emotional regulation difficulties may arise through different mechanisms across neurodevelopmental and clinical groups, and that cross-informant differences are best understood as reflecting differences in the contextual visibility of emotional distress rather than simple disagreement or measurement unreliability.

Effortful regulation in school contexts

The most prominent pattern within the autism group was effortful behavioural regulation during the school day, followed by emotional exhaustion, overwhelm, or shutdown at home. Eight of the ten autistic cases described children who appeared behaviourally settled in school but were using substantial effort to maintain this presentation.

Parents repeatedly described a striking mismatch between the child's school presentation and their post-school emotional state. One parent wrote, "They seem fine at school but once they get home everything comes out. It is like they have been holding it in all day." Another described the same pattern in terms of delayed emotional release: "Teachers say everything is fine during the day, but when they get home they are exhausted and overwhelmed. It feels like they have spent the whole day trying to keep themselves together." A further parent explained, "At school they follow the rules and try very hard to do what is expected. When they get home they are completely drained and sometimes shut down or become very upset."

These accounts did not simply describe emotional difficulty; they described effortful emotional containment within the school context. Parents consistently framed the child's school presentation as costly rather than effortless. This was reinforced in descriptions of teacher perceptions. One parent noted, "School say they are quiet and well behaved, but they do not see how much effort it takes for them to manage everything during the day." The implication across these accounts was that school staff often observed behavioural compliance while missing the internal strain required to sustain it.

Although similar descriptions appeared occasionally in other groups, including some cases in the Anxiety Disorder and ADHD groups, the pattern was far more prevalent and more fully elaborated in autistic cases. This pattern provides a plausible qualitative account of the negative informant-specific effects observed in the quantitative analyses. The quantitative findings indicated that, for autistic pupils, teacher ratings were lower than would be expected given parent-reported emotional distress. The qualitative data suggest that this may reflect emotional distress being masked, delayed, or behaviourally contained in ways that reduce its visibility to teachers.

Reactive emotional regulation

Reactive emotional regulation was the dominant pattern in the ADHD group. Nine of the ten ADHD cases described emotional responses that were immediate, intense, externally visible, and linked to moment-to-moment frustration or perceived unfairness.

Parents emphasised the speed with which emotional states changed. One wrote, "If something does not go the way they expect, the reaction is immediate. They can go from calm to frustrated very quickly." Another parent similarly explained, "The emotions are very quick. If they feel something is unfair or difficult, the frustration appears straight away." Intensity was also central to these accounts. One parent observed, "When they feel frustrated it is very strong in that moment, but it can also pass quite quickly once the situation changes."

What was particularly notable in this group was the extent to which parents described teachers as seeing much the same pattern. One parent reported that school described their child as "Very enthusiastic and energetic but sometimes quick to become frustrated if things do not go as planned." Unlike the autistic pattern, where school and home accounts diverged substantially, the ADHD pattern was characterised by cross-context observability. Emotional responses were described as externally expressed, rapid, and difficult to miss.

This qualitative pattern is consistent with the positive informant-specific effects found in the quantitative analyses. Teachers were not merely disagreeing with parents; they were often observing highly visible dysregulation in real time. The qualitative data therefore support the interpretation that, in ADHD, emotional distress or dysregulation may be more salient within the classroom context, contributing to higher teacher ratings relative to parent report.

Persistent internal worry

The Anxiety Disorder group was characterised by persistent internal worry. All ten parents in this group described children who experienced ongoing apprehension, anticipatory concern, and difficulty disengaging from anxious thoughts. In contrast to the ADHD pattern, these responses were less about rapid reactivity and more about sustained, internally focused distress.

One parent wrote, “They worry about things long before they happen and often expect something to go wrong.” Another explained, “They think about things repeatedly and find it difficult to stop worrying once something is on their mind.” Uncertainty emerged repeatedly as a trigger. A parent noted, “If they do not know exactly what will happen during the day, they can become very worried.”

Importantly, these worries were not confined to the home. Parents often described teachers as recognising similar difficulties in school contexts. One wrote, “Teachers say they sometimes become very anxious about getting things wrong, especially during tests or when they have to speak in class.” This cross-context recognition is important. It suggests that, although the distress may be internal in nature, it is nevertheless sufficiently evident across settings to be recognised by both informants.

This pattern aligns closely with the relatively small informant-specific effects observed quantitatively. The quantitative analyses suggested comparatively strong agreement between parent and teacher reports in the Anxiety Disorder group once shared variance was accounted for. The qualitative data support this interpretation by showing that anxiety-related distress was often consistently experienced and recognised across home and school, rather than being strongly masked in one context or over-amplified in another.

Communication-linked frustration

Communication-linked frustration emerged as a dominant pattern in the DLD group. Nine of the ten cases described emotional distress that arose when children could not express themselves clearly, process language quickly enough, or keep up with communicative demands in classroom interactions.

Parents frequently described frustration linked to expressive difficulty. One wrote, “If they cannot find the words they want to say, they become frustrated and sometimes stop trying to explain.” Another described the emotional consequence of communication breakdown more directly: “They know what they want to say but cannot always say it quickly enough. That can make them upset.” Some parents also described a more subtle pattern of withdrawal rather than overt dysregulation. For example, one wrote, “In class they join in but if the conversation moves quickly they sometimes become quiet because they need more time to think.”

Parents often contrasted school with less demanding contexts. One noted, “Outside school there is less pressure to speak quickly, so they seem much more relaxed.” This suggests that emotional distress in this group may be tied less to a stable generalised internal state and more to the communicative pressures of particular settings.

This provides a plausible account of the more modest and variable informant-specific effects identified quantitatively. In DLD, parent–teacher differences may depend on the degree to which emotionally salient communicative difficulty is exposed by the context. The issue is therefore not simple disagreement, but the fact that emotional distress is often situationally elicited by communication demands that may be more pronounced in school than at home.

Academic confidence sensitivity

Within the MLD group, emotional responses were closely linked to academic confidence and perceived competence. Eight of the ten cases described children becoming discouraged, anxious, or withdrawn when faced with tasks they experienced as difficult.

One parent explained, “When they cannot understand something in maths or reading they sometimes say ‘I’m not good at this’ and withdraw for a short time.” Another similarly wrote, “They work very hard but if something feels difficult they can become discouraged quite quickly.” Parents often emphasised that these responses were sensitive to adult support and reassurance. As one parent noted, “Teachers say they need encouragement to keep trying when work feels challenging.”

In contrast to the autism group, these accounts did not suggest broad masking of distress across the school day, nor the rapid outward reactivity seen in ADHD. Instead, emotional difficulties were described as more tightly linked to specific academic demands and to the child’s confidence in managing them. Parents often reported that outside school contexts the child appeared more settled and emotionally stable.

This pattern is consistent with the relatively small informant-specific effects observed quantitatively. Emotional distress in the MLD group appears to be task-linked and context-bound, rather than pervasively hidden or consistently over-visible. As a result, teacher–parent discrepancies may be less extreme and more dependent on when and where the child is observed.

Typical emotional variability

Parents in the non-SEND group described emotional regulation as generally stable, with ordinary fluctuations in mood that were brief, proportionate, and followed by rapid recovery. One parent wrote, “They might feel disappointed if they lose a game but usually recover quickly and continue playing.” Another said, “They have normal ups and downs but it never lasts very long.”

Parents also described this pattern as consistent across settings. One reported, “Teachers say they interact well with other children and manage classroom routines without difficulty.” These accounts suggested that emotional responses were broadly typical, context-appropriate, and readily regulated without prolonged distress or marked discrepancy between home and school.

This pattern aligns with the relatively small informant-specific effects identified quantitatively and provides a useful comparison point. In the absence of clinically significant emotional or neurodevelopmental difficulties, parent and teacher reports appeared to converge not because one

informant had privileged access, but because emotional experiences were relatively stable and similarly visible across contexts.

Cross-group interpretation

Across groups, the qualitative findings suggest that parent–teacher differences reflect differences in emotional regulation and contextual expression rather than simple reporting inconsistencies. The Autism group was distinguished by effortful behavioural regulation in school followed by emotional exhaustion at home, a pattern that offers a strong explanatory account of why teacher ratings underestimated emotional distress in the quantitative analyses. In contrast, children with ADHD showed rapid, externally visible emotional reactions that were observable across settings, helping to explain why teacher ratings tended to be elevated relative to parent report. Children with anxiety disorders were characterised by persistent internal worry that appeared sufficiently evident across home and school contexts to support comparatively high agreement between informants. For pupils with DLD and MLD, emotional responses appeared to be more closely tied to situational demands such as communication breakdown or academic difficulty, generating more context-dependent and less extreme informant differences.

Taken together, these qualitative findings support the interpretation that cross-informant differences in emotional distress are not best understood as measurement error. Rather, they reflect structured informant-specific patterns arising from the interaction between children's emotional profiles and the contexts in which those profiles are observed. In this sense, the qualitative analysis complements the quantitative findings by showing how emotional distress may be masked, amplified, or situationally elicited in ways that differentially shape parent and teacher report.

This qualitative account also helps clarify the meaning of the quantitative results. The analyses showed that, after accounting for shared variance in emotional distress, systematic informant-specific effects remained. The qualitative data suggest that these effects are not arbitrary. Instead, they appear to be linked to whether distress is effortfully concealed, externally expressed, consistently visible, or triggered by particular environmental demands. The mixed-methods convergence across the two strands therefore strengthens the conclusion that parent–teacher discrepancies reflect meaningful contextual variation in the visibility and interpretation of emotional distress.

Discussion

The present study examined whether variation between parent and teacher reports of children's emotional distress reflects measurement inconsistency or systematic, context-dependent differences in emotional functioning. Using a regression-based approach to distinguish shared variance in emotional distress from informant-specific variation, the study enabled more precise interpretation of cross-informant patterns. The consistency of the findings across measures supports the interpretability of this approach.

Parent and teacher reports showed substantial shared variance, indicating convergence on a common dimension of emotional distress. However, this convergence was incomplete. Informant-specific variation remained after accounting for shared variance, demonstrating that emotional distress is not uniformly expressed or observed across contexts. This is consistent with prior work showing that variation between informants reflects contextual differences in behaviour and emotional functioning rather than unreliability alone (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005; De Los Reyes et al., 2015; Kanne et al., 2009). Crucially, these findings suggest that variation between informants reflects not only differences in observation, but structured differences in the conditions under which emotional distress becomes visible.

These findings support a reconceptualisation of informant differences as indicators of contextual visibility rather than measurement error. Parents and teachers observe children in environments that differ in structure, demands, and available support. These contextual differences shape whether emotional distress is externally expressed, internally contained, delayed, or selectively elicited. Informant-specific variation therefore reflects systematic differences in how emotional functioning manifests across contexts, and is better understood as an index of context-dependent expression rather than distortion in reporting. This interpretation aligns with ecological and transactional models of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sameroff, 2009) and extends previous work suggesting that informant discrepancies reflect situational specificity (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005). Rather than asking which informant is more accurate, each report can be understood as providing context-specific information about the conditions under which emotional distress becomes visible.

Clear and theoretically coherent patterns emerged across diagnostic groups. For autistic children, teacher-reported distress was lower than expected after accounting for shared variance. Qualitative findings suggest that this may reflect effortful behavioural regulation within structured environments, with emotional strain becoming more apparent outside school. This aligns with research on camouflaging and compensatory behaviour (Hull et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2021; Livingston et al., 2019), as well as work on autistic burnout and school-related distress (Raymaker et al., 2020; Mantzalas et al., 2022). In this context, lower teacher-reported distress reflects reduced visibility rather than absence of difficulty, highlighting how emotional strain may be actively contained within classroom settings.

In contrast, children with ADHD showed elevated teacher-reported distress relative to parent report. Emotional responses in ADHD are often rapid, externally expressed, and closely tied to environmental demands (Shaw et al., 2014; Barkley, 2015). In structured classroom contexts, where demands for sustained regulation are high, these responses may become particularly salient. Informant differences in this group therefore appear to reflect context-dependent amplification of emotional behaviour rather than over-reporting.

Patterns in other groups were less extreme but remained interpretable. In anxiety disorders, reports were relatively consistent across contexts, reflecting the pervasive and internally sustained nature of worry (Chorpita et al., 2000; Goodman, 2001). In developmental language disorder, emotional difficulty

appeared linked to communicative demands and interactional pressures (Conti-Ramsden & Botting, 2008; Lindsay & Dockrell, 2012). In moderate learning difficulties, emotional responses were more closely tied to task difficulty and the availability of support, resulting in smaller discrepancies. The non-SEND group showed relatively consistent reports across contexts, reflecting stable emotional regulation. Across groups, the magnitude of informant-specific variation appears to depend on how emotional distress is regulated, expressed, and made visible within particular environmental conditions.

A key strength of the study is the integration of quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative analyses demonstrated systematic informant-specific variation, while qualitative findings provided insight into the mechanisms underlying these patterns. Emotional distress was variously masked, externally expressed, persistently experienced, or situationally elicited depending on the interaction between individual characteristics and contextual demands. This convergence strengthens the interpretation that variation between informants reflects meaningful developmental processes rather than measurement artefact. Informant-specific variation can therefore be understood as an indicator of how emotional distress is differentially expressed and recognised across contexts.

The findings have direct implications for educational and clinical assessment. Reliance on classroom-based indicators alone may underestimate emotional difficulty in children whose distress is effortfully contained in structured settings, particularly autistic pupils. At the same time, highly visible emotional dysregulation in school contexts, as seen in ADHD, may be overinterpreted without sufficient consideration of contextual demands. A multi-informant approach is therefore essential not simply to improve reliability, but to capture how emotional functioning varies across contexts. Differences between reports should be interpreted as informative, highlighting where distress is visible, where it is masked, and under what conditions it emerges.

More broadly, the findings support a view of emotional functioning as context-dependent and dynamically expressed, rather than as a stable trait uniformly available to all observers. They extend existing work on multi-informant assessment by demonstrating that variation between informants is condition-specific and systematically patterned. Methodologically, the findings highlight the limitations of relying on raw discrepancy scores. Distinguishing shared and informant-specific variance provides a more informative framework, allowing differences between reports to be interpreted in relation to contextual visibility rather than agreement alone.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. Diagnostic group membership was based on parent-reported diagnoses, which may introduce some imprecision (Kanne et al., 2009). This approach is common in community-based research where independent clinical verification is not feasible; however, findings should be interpreted with this constraint in mind.

The analytic approach does not provide a full latent decomposition of trait and method variance. While the regression-based framework allows clear distinction between shared and informant-specific

variation at the level of observed scores, it does not capture latent structure and should therefore be understood as an analytically pragmatic rather than comprehensive modelling approach.

The cross-sectional design limits conclusions about developmental change over time. Longitudinal research would be valuable in examining how patterns of contextual visibility evolve across development and in response to changing environmental demands.

Finally, the qualitative component relied on parent report only. Although this aligns with the study's focus on understanding differences between informants from the parental perspective, inclusion of teacher or child perspectives would provide a more comprehensive account of how emotional distress is experienced and recognised across contexts.

Conclusion

Variation between parent and teacher reports of children's emotional distress reflects systematic, condition-specific differences in the contextual visibility of emotional functioning rather than simple measurement inconsistency. By distinguishing shared and informant-specific variance and integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, the study demonstrates that differences between informants provide a window into the contextual dynamics of emotional functioning, revealing both hidden vulnerability and context-specific dysregulation within everyday settings.

Declarations

The author reports no conflicts of interest.

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The author confirms that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to support aspects of language refinement and editing during manuscript preparation. All intellectual content, analysis, and interpretations are the sole work of the author.

Author Contribution

M.W. conceived the study, designed the methodology, conducted data collection, performed the analysis, and wrote the main manuscript text. M.W. also prepared all tables and reviewed the final manuscript.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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