

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Parents' Insights on Post-Transition Support for Students on the Autism Spectrum in Secondary Schools[†]

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Abstract

The transition from primary to secondary school, encompassing the pre-, during-, and post-transition stages, often poses significant challenges for students on the autism spectrum. This critical period has garnered growing research attention; however, the perspectives of Australian parents on the support their autistic children receive post-transition remain largely unexplored. Underpinned by a transcendental phenomenological epistemology and Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming, we explored Australian parents' perspectives on the support being provided to their children on the autism spectrum and how these students experience this post-transition period. Four parents of high-school-aged children on the autism spectrum participated in interviews, conducted online via Zoom. A deductive content analysis of parents' insights revealed overwhelming dissatisfaction with the post-transition support provided to their children on the autism spectrum, particularly surrounding home-school collaboration practices and the utilisation of personalised learning. The findings contribute a much-needed Australian perspective to the limited body of research focused on sustaining support for students on the autism spectrum beyond the initial transition to secondary school.

Keywords: autism; transition; education; secondary school; perspectives; parents

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed., text rev.; *DSM-5-TR*; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022), autism is considered a set of neurodevelopmental impairments characterised by challenges in social interaction, communication, and flexibility (APA, 2022). Precise numbers of secondary school children with autism in Australia are difficult to find. According to the 2018 survey of *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia*, by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022), there were 290,900 Australians with autism in 2022. This saw a 41.8% increase from the 205,200 with autism in 2018. In 2022, 7.8% of the Australians with autism were between the ages of 10 and 19. Since students between the ages of 11 and 18 typically attend secondary schools in Australia, the number of students on the autism spectrum in secondary schools can be roughly estimated to be 15,990. Considering the increase of Australians with autism from 2018 to 2022, it is expected that there has been an additional increase in the number of students on the spectrum in the last 2 or 3 years. As mandated by the Disability Standards for Education 2005, schools in Australia must ensure all learners are supported meaningfully so that each student can participate in education on the same basis as students without disability (Australian Government, 2005).

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Although all schools in Australia must comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Australian Government, 1992) and the Disability Standards for Education 2005, each state implements independent transition policies, leading to inconsistent experiences for students across the country. For example, the New South Wales Department of Education (2022) broadly states in the *Inclusive Education Statement for Students with Disability* that ‘Teachers and schools will work in partnership with families and carers to prepare students for key transitions’ (p. 2). The *Inclusive Education Policy* of the Queensland Government Department of Education (2021) explicitly states that schools are expected to ‘continue to work in partnership with students, families, community organisations, professional groups, and other government and educational organisations to plan and support successful transitions at all points in a learner’s education’ (p. 3). This policy speaks broadly for students with all types of disabilities and advocates for independence through the implementation of personalised support and scaffolded instructional techniques (Josilowski & Morris, 2019). The Government of Western Australia (2022) operates transitional support practices for students with disability in public schools under the *Enrolment Framework for Students with Disability in Public Schools* and includes a specific section dedicated to students on the autism spectrum. This framework states that specialist learning programs are available whereby principals will ‘facilitate the transfer and transition to a new school where this is agreed to by the parents’ (Section 1.7). Although the policy narrowly frames principals and parents as the sole stakeholders, it is strengthened by its explicit focus on support for students with autism. A comparison of policies across three states reveals a lack of consistency in how Australian students on the autism spectrum are supported during the transition to secondary school.

Providing comprehensive and consistent support during school transitions is essential to empower students on the autism spectrum as they navigate these experiences. The transition to secondary school is often impacted by environmental and systemic barriers that can contribute to difficulties experienced by students, particularly those on the autism spectrum. As noted by Simpkins et al. (2025), unfamiliar physical environments, abrupt changes in timetabling and routine, and increased social and academic demands present distinct challenges that can disrupt a student’s sense of predictability and security. These factors are often exacerbated by a lack of consistency in school policies and procedures, which can lead to some students experiencing increased levels of anxiety, behavioural responses, or withdrawal during transition.

As argued by Chandroo et al. (2018) and Stack et al. (2021), the quality of transition support from primary to high school for students on the autism spectrum is a critical determination of their educational success and overall wellbeing. Richter et al. (2019) and Josilowski and Morris (2019) state that transition planning involves consideration of three stages: pre-transition, during transition, and post-transition. Although descriptions of these stages vary among researchers, Deacy et al. (2015) define pre-transition as 2 years before the school change, with post-transition continuing for 1 year afterward. There is considerable research on the support provided to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the during-transition stage (Dillon & Underwood, 2012; Richter et al., 2020; Stack et al., 2021; Tobin et al., 2012; Tso & Strnadová, 2017). The current study aims to explore the post-transition stage for students on the autism spectrum, as this is an underresearched area, particularly in the Australian context.

Recent literature on supports for the primary to high school transition point has gathered a range of perspectives from parents, teachers, and students (Hill et al., 2018; LaBarbera, 2017; Meade, 2011; Stack et al., 2021). However, research using parental perspectives on the school transitions experienced by their child on the autism spectrum is limited. A relatively small number of studies published within the last 10 to 15 years suggest some interest in this area. For example, studies conducted by Dillon and Underwood (2012), Tobin et al. (2012), and Hamilton and Wilkinson (2016) used focus groups to gather the perspectives of parents of students on the autism spectrum. These authors indicated that parents were unsure whether new schooling environments were adequately prepared for their child’s individual aspirations and needs.

On the other hand, the study conducted by Richter et al. (2020) revealed that most parents were satisfied with how their child transitioned by the end of the same school year. Although these studies

examined the perspectives of parents of children on the autism spectrum, they were mainly conducted in European countries. Consequently, the results are unlikely representative of the Australian parent population and the experiences of school-aged students on the autism spectrum. Hence, there is a need to capture the Australian experiences of how transition support, particularly post-transition support, is experienced for this population.

One area increasingly highlighted as essential for successful transition in both research and policy is personalised learning. Personalised learning can be defined as a pedagogical approach that extends concepts of differentiation and individualisation, whereby teaching practices are tailored and paced to the needs of different learners' interests, experiences, and abilities (Shemshack & Spector, 2020). Abawi (2015) and Tsai et al. (2020) emphasise the role of personalised learning in creating smoother transitions for students with autism as it empowers students to become co-designers of their own learning pathways. Strategies for personalisation include data-based individualisation, behaviour plans, transition plans, and target-specific interventions such as literacy or support programs involving learning and support teachers (LaSTs) or school learning support officers (SLSOs; Bernacki et al., 2021; Tsai et al., 2020).

For example, the design and implementation of individualised plans (e.g., individualised education plan [IEP], behaviour plan, transition plan) are often used to consistently communicate the types and levels of adjustment required for students requiring additional support. Upon conducting a case study at a rural high school, Szidon et al. (2015) proposed a five-step framework for learning support teams to successfully write individualised transition plans for each child on the autism spectrum. However, the framework overlooks the importance of student participation during the development of individualised plans, which Barnard-Brak and Fearon (2012) and Stack et al. (2021) argued is essential for successful transitions as it helps to alleviate student anxieties, develop self-advocacy skills, and thereafter achieve self-determination.

Similarly, studies including Talapatra et al. (2019), Tsao and Krueger (2010), and Malan (2022) explicitly address the importance of home-school collaboration in school transitions, which can be defined as an ongoing, reciprocal commitment for shared decision-making to support a child's learning. Although there is substantial research surrounding the importance of home-school collaboration, the gap lies in not having explicit understandings as to how this collaboration is realised and maintained post-transition, particularly from an Australian perspective. The current study investigated how both of these fundamental transition supports (i.e., personalised learning and home-school collaboration) are being performed and maintained in the post-transition stage for Australian high-school-aged students on the autism spectrum. The following research questions were used to guide this investigation:

1. From parents' perspectives, what personalised learning and home-school collaboration supports have been provided post-transition?
2. From parents' perspectives, how do students on the autism spectrum experience the post-transition period?
3. What recommendations do parents make to improve post-transition experiences for children on the autism spectrum?

Method

In the current study, a phenomenological epistemology approach was used to explore the perspectives of Australian parents of children on the autism spectrum regarding the post-transition period in secondary school. As identified by Creswell (2007), phenomenology is a foundation of qualitative research, used to 'reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence' (p. 58). The purpose of phenomenology is to describe *what* was experienced and *how* something was experienced (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015; Neubauer et al., 2019). There exists a misperception

that phenomenology is one unified approach; however, as argued by Eddles-Hirsch (2015), it consists of three disparate complex philosophies: transcendental, existential, and heuristic phenomenology. This study is specifically underpinned by Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenology because it is focused less on the researcher's interpretations and gives more authority to participants' experiences. By using this epistemology, we can develop a deeper understanding about the shared features of parents' perspectives as their child on the spectrum experiences the post-transition stage at high school. Transcendental phenomenological research is achieved when the researcher deliberately disconnects their own personal experiences, setting aside any preconceived knowledge or everyday beliefs that may be used to explain the phenomenon being investigated (Dansby et al., 2018; Knaack, 1984; Neubauer et al., 2019).

Kohler's Taxonomy for Transition Programming is the theoretical framework that underpins this investigation as it is centred around effective practices related to improved student outcomes (Kohler, 1996). Transition planning is believed to be the 'fundamental basis of education' (Kohler et al., 2016, p. 2), and this framework states there are five key practice categories within the model: (a) student-focused planning, (b) student development, (c) interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration, (d) family involvement, and (e) program structure. Engaging with this framework has allowed us to consolidate these five categories into two broader research-based concepts: personalised learning and home-school collaboration.

Participants

Ethical approval was granted through the University of Sydney for this project prior to participant recruitment (2024/HE000001). Convenience sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) and snowball sampling (Suri, 2011) were employed by reaching out to autism-related social media communities and personal contacts to advertise this study. Thirteen Australian autism-related Facebook groups were approached to share the research participant opportunity, with only three willing to post the study invitation (i.e., Autism Awareness Australia, Autism Parents Carers Australia, and Autism MATES). Due to limited responses from these platforms, personal contacts were subsequently approached to broaden the outreach and generate greater interest among parents of children on the autism spectrum.

Interested participants were recruited by completing an expression of interest and checking that they met the following inclusion criteria: (a) parent or carer of a high-school-aged child with an autism diagnosis; (b) their child is enrolled in a school within Australia at the time of the interview; and (c) their child is in the post-transition stage at the time of the interview, which, in this study, we considered to be any time after their first year of transition (i.e., Year 7). Once we had received the expression of interest and checked their eligibility to be a participant, individuals were provided with a participant information statement and participant consent form. We offered to answer any questions that potential participants had prior to their consent and reiterated what their commitment was expected to be, how their data would be used, how confidentiality would be maintained, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Written informed consent to participate was then obtained from each parent/carer via email. This study involved four parents of high-school-aged (Year 8 and above) children on the autism spectrum. Table 1 provides demographic details about the participating parents and their children. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms are used for parent participants and their child.

Data Collection

A semistructured interview schedule was developed to investigate the research questions guiding this investigation. The interview schedule covered three broad topic areas: (a) post-transition supports received, (b) the post-transition experience, and (c) suggestions for improving post-transition support for students on the autism spectrum. The one-to-one interviews encompassed both primary

Table 1. Participants and Their Children's Profiles

Name of parent participant	Name of child	School year of child	Gender of child	Location of school in Australia	Type of school	Type of class	Identification of child's autism diagnosis and comorbidities
Olive	Peter	8	Male	New South Wales (NSW)	Public	Learning support class	Autism, ADHD, and selective mutism
Francesca	Emma	8	Female	NSW	Public	Mainstream	Autism, dyscalculia, ADHD, and ARFID
Therese	Ashley	10	Female	NSW	Public, selective	Mainstream	Autism (Level 2), ADHD, and selective mutism
Tanisha	Rachel	11	Female	Victoria	Public, rural	Mainstream	Autism

Note. ADHD = attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder; ARFID = avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder.

open-ended questions and a series of follow-up questions. For the parents' and researchers' convenience, interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Aligned with similar studies in this field (Tso & Strnadová, 2017), the interviews ranged from 30 to 65 minutes in length. For accurate transcription of interview data, all participants provided written consent to be audio- and video-recorded during their interviews.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed using qualitative deductive content analysis to align with other transcendental phenomenological studies, including the study by Dansby et al. (2018). To conduct this data analysis, interview data were transcribed verbatim manually, whereby all identifying information was removed from transcripts. Given the qualitative nature of the data collected, two coders independently reviewed and coded a subset from each transcript and discussed the coding results, resolving any disagreements. Coding units included paragraphs, sentences, or words with commonalities within context to develop categories and subcategories. Consensus was reached on any varying codes to maintain consistency through interrater reliability procedures (Armstrong et al., 1997). Final categories and subcategories were agreed upon by both coders.

Results

From the four interviews, 92 individual statements were identified as relevant. Deductive content analysis reflected four categories: (a) personalised learning, (b) home-school collaboration, (c) child's social and emotional wellbeing, and (d) recommendations.

Personalised Learning

In the category of personalised learning, the relevant subcategories identified, in order of frequency, were (a) example or illustration ($n = 16$, 17.39%), (b) dissatisfaction with personalised learning ($n = 9$, 9.78%), and (c) satisfaction with personalised learning ($n = 5$, 5.43%). Personalised learning strategies, such as SLSO support, individualised plans, and literacy classes, were frequently mentioned throughout the interviews. For example, Olive and Therese described their children's experiences with SLSOs as a sustained transition support. Olive shared, 'Peter is in a support class attached to the local high school. There are about 11 kids. They have one teacher and one teacher's aide.' Therese stated, 'She had an SLSO that would check in with her individually sometimes just for a catch-up.'

There were several statements by parents that expressed satisfaction towards the personalised learning support offered throughout the overall transition. For example, Olive highlighted her appreciation for extra transition days in the pre-transition stage, while Tanisha expressed her gratitude for reengagement sessions in the post-transition stage. Specifically, Tanisha stated, 'They take Rachel out of class at different times during the week and just give her a rest from the overstimulating environment ... it has just made things so much better for her.'

However, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of personalised learning support offered in classrooms, particularly during the post-transition period. Tanisha was frustrated by the reduction of reengagement sessions for her Year 9 daughter, adding, 'But then we go into Year 9 and no support whatsoever. No reengagement, nothing. And I got told, "Mate, you guys will be fine, you don't need it. You're in middle school now!" So middle school don't get it.'

At times, personalised learning turned into a counterproductive experience, where parents and their children developed negative feelings or emotions. For example, Therese expressed that her child, Ashley, received unwanted SLSO support and exam accommodations, making Ashley feel uncomfortable and self-conscious. It is evident that Ashley did not want to be singled out from her peers and preferred that teachers offer universal support to the whole class, not just for students on the autism spectrum. This was articulated in the following statement from Therese:

The SLSO in class just made her really uncomfortable and she felt very conscious about things being fair. She doesn't want any kind of special treatment or attention drawn to her. Everything she wants, she just wants everyone to have access to.

Therese further expressed that in spite of having an individualised plan for Ashley, the plan was written and formatted poorly, making it seem that the process wasn't taken seriously. She stated,

I think there's been three IEPs so far. There are a few sections where they obviously talked to Ashley for her input. It's quite difficult to read, though. The formatting seems to have been completely messed up, so it's a bunch of gibberish for some of it.

These insights from parents illustrate how personalised learning approaches play a pivotal role in supporting students on the autism spectrum during and beyond the transition to high school. However, the inconsistency of individualised support highlights the need for a more streamlined and serious process to ensure equitable access to effective personalised learning for all students.

Home-School Collaboration

In the category of home-school collaboration, the relevant subcategories were identified and included (a) dissatisfaction with home-school collaboration ($n = 13$, 14.13%), (b) example or illustration ($n = 2$, 2.17%), and (c) satisfaction with home-school collaboration ($n = 2$, 2.17%). Although some schools provided structures like learning support teams and counsellors, parents often faced challenges in accessing support or had unpleasant interactions with school staff. These experiences resulted in feelings of isolation and frustration among parents. For example, Tanisha reported experiencing complete silence from the school despite multiple attempts to establish contact: 'There was no contact, there was no return phone call, and I rang more than once. And I left messages that I never ever got a return phone call ever.' Olive reported a lack of clarity and transparency regarding information about support classes for her child, stating that 'It wasn't clear how support classes work and how they integrate with the rest of the mainstream classes.'

Dissatisfaction with home-school collaboration further stemmed from dismissive attitudes and the perceived lack of training among teachers, which compounded parents' frustrations. Francesca shared an interaction where the LaST's admission of inadequate training was conveyed in a dismissive tone: 'The learning support teacher said, "oh, good luck with that because I've never had any training."' Although dissatisfaction was the dominant subcategory, some positive comments were associated with home-school collaboration. For example, Olive described how a teacher took the initiative to maintain direct communication, which helped facilitate better support for her child, Peter. Olive stated, 'Our teacher last year was amazing. She basically just gave us her mobile number and she would communicate with me if there were any issues. She also had a communication book.' Hence, while some parents experienced some strong partnerships, overall dissatisfaction revealed a need for more transparent, respectful, and responsive communication between schools and families.

Child's Social and Emotional Wellbeing

The subcategories related to the child's social and emotional wellbeing, in order of frequency, were (a) concerned with child's social and emotional wellbeing ($n = 14$, 15.22%), (b) example or illustration ($n = 6$, 6.52%), and (c) satisfied with child's social and emotional wellbeing ($n = 5$, 5.43%). Three parents expressed deep concern for their child's emotional wellbeing throughout the transition period. For example, Olive described how Peter's developing emotional regulation led to a reduction in school attendance, as his meltdowns escalated and he was sent home on several occasions. She stated, 'We had days where he refused to go to school — days where he was sent home because he just, you know, escalated and couldn't control himself.'

Three of the four parents noted that the increasing need for masking was a significant factor contributing to student meltdowns. For instance, Francesca described how her daughter found both academic and social aspects of school difficult and how masking in class left Emma feeling exhausted by the end of the day. She said, 'I think she's been struggling a little bit with the learning and the homework. She struggles with getting distracted in class and also masking in class quite a lot. So she's just exhausted by the time she gets home.'

Although concerns about emotional and social wellbeing were more frequently reported, there were some positive experiences where support from teachers was seen to contribute to better social and emotional outcomes for students. Two of the four parents shared that structured social interactions and supportive teachers had a positive impact on their child's social and emotional wellbeing. For example, a teacher's effort to facilitate a friendship between Peter and another student resulted in a strong student-to-student bond. Olive stated, 'The teacher sort of facilitated this connection between Peter and another boy in class, and they became good friends that even now will influence how good his day is.' Tanisha highlighted the importance of a teacher who made consistent efforts to develop a relationship with her daughter and boost Rachel's self-esteem. Tanisha stated,

Her teacher always makes an effort to bolster up her self-esteem, and he really has formulated that rapport with her. She can be very honest with when she gets overwhelmed and stuff like that. So that has really helped Rachel.

Overall, parents emphasised that supporting their child's social and emotional wellbeing through patience and relational teaching is foundational to a successful transition and post-transition period.

Parents' Recommendations

Parents offered several recommendations to aid improved support for students on the autism spectrum. The subcategories identified within this category, in order of frequency, were (a) teacher-specific ($n = 14$, 15.22%), (b) school-wide ($n = 12$, 13.04%), and (c) classroom ($n = 5$, 5.43%). At the teacher-specific level, parents emphasised the desire for teachers to practise more kindness, empathy, and rapport-building with students. Tanisha shared that teacher-initiated gestures, such as greeting children with a smile, had a lasting impact on the emotional wellbeing of their child throughout the school day. She said,

It's just that smile, warmth, and compassion at the start of the day to get her set up . . . saying 'good morning' to her and acknowledging her just gives her confidence. Just that, I feel, would quite often get a kid to actually attend school because it makes them feel not alone.

Three of the four parents also highlighted the need for teachers to have more training and a better understanding of neurodiversity. For example, Francesca stressed that patience combined with teacher training could significantly enhance the transition experience for students on the autism spectrum, stating,

My main thing, I feel, is not to sort of make a deal about her being neurodivergent, but she just needs patience and kindness. It comes back to having that training and that knowledge around neurodiversity and disability, to actually take time to understand the kids.

Furthermore, three of the four parents emphasised the importance of accommodating each student's unique needs, recognising that even individuals with the same diagnosis can require different types of support. Therese stated, 'The main thing is to listen to the individual and what works for them, as it can be very different for each person, even if they have the same diagnosis.'

At a school-wide level, three of the parents suggested creating quiet spaces where students could alleviate stress or anxiousness during the school day. For example, Francesca said, 'Schools need to just have a room that's constantly quiet where students can just pop their head in and take a break.' The importance of better communication between parents and schools was further emphasised by three of the four parents, specifically noting the need for timely responses and access to support when requested. Tanisha said,

Just more communication with the school, whether that's phone calls, emails or just getting back to me when I ask. If you're looking for psychologists in the school, they should be available for your child if they need that service.

Additionally, one parent recommended having extra transition sessions in the pre-transition stage to help mitigate the difficulties that students on the autism spectrum can face during the transition process. Olive stated, 'They really needed a lot more transition time. Like if I was recommending anything to you, I would be saying like maybe one session a week for the whole of Term 4 in Year 6.' Further, parents collectively expressed the need for additional support for their child in choosing elective subjects for Year 9 and 10, highlighting that the decision-making process was particularly difficult for their high-school-aged children. Therese stated, 'I think one of the things that has been hard for her has been choosing electives, and I think she probably needed more help and support with making decisions.'

At a classroom level, one parent discussed the significance of social structures and peer interaction during class activities. Tanisha explained how peer teaching has helped her child better understand and retain information. She stated, 'If she teaches someone else in her class, that helps her understand what she's actually learning and helps her retain the information.'

Francesca advocated for scaffolding assessment tasks for all students, not just those on the autism spectrum, to help create a more supportive and inclusive classroom environment. She said, 'Breaking down assessment tasks into smaller, sort of more manageable chunks should be something that's done for all the kids, not just for the kids with [a] particular executive functioning sort of issue.' Ultimately, parents provided thoughtful, experience-based suggestions for transition that underscore the importance of personalised, ongoing, and collaborative strategies.

Discussion

Underpinned by Kohler's theoretical framework and a transcendental phenomenological epistemology, it is evident from this study's findings that personalised learning and home-school collaboration are critical transition elements that should be considered for smoother transitions for students on the autism spectrum.

Post-Transition Support

The aim of the first research question was to understand parents' perspectives on what personalised learning and home-school collaboration supports were being provided to their children on the autism spectrum post-transition. Parents reported various personalised learning strategies, including individual learning plans, time-out cards, teaching assistants, additional literacy sessions, and reengagement sessions. Many of these are commonly mentioned in the existing literature (Bernacki et al., 2021; Shemshack & Spector, 2020; Tsai et al., 2020). Additionally, home-school collaboration was, at times, facilitated through emails, phone calls, parent-teacher meetings, and communication books. These are strategies that existing studies have shown to enhance shared decision-making throughout the transition process (Deslandes, 2019; Griffiths et al., 2021; Josilowski & Morris, 2019; LaBarbera, 2017).

However, there was an overwhelming dissatisfaction with post-transition supports. While most parents expressed dissatisfaction due to the lack of availability of post-transition supports, Therese expressed dissatisfaction due to unnecessary SLSO support and poorly written plans. According to studies by Chopra and Giangreco (2019), Rasmitadila and Goldstein (2017), and Viktorin (2018), a lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities for teaching assistants can have detrimental effects on the inclusion of students they support, resulting in, for example, deficit attitudes towards students with disability and leading to stigma or social exclusion. Despite the availability of these supports, the mere presence of post-transition support services does not guarantee their effective implementation or positive outcomes for all students. This suggests that while post-transition supports are crucial for sustained transition for students on the autism spectrum, schools must tailor them to individuals' unique preferences, aspirations, and needs.

Parents' mixed feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction expressed in the interviews were not necessarily directed at post-transition support but were towards all types of support received throughout the pre-, during, and post-transition stages. Parents were mostly satisfied with the pre- and during-transition supports that mainly involved collaboration between primary and secondary schools, as well as extra transition sessions designed to alleviate anxieties at the initial transition stage. These supports were perceived as beneficial but were not considered post-transition supports, as they were not implemented after the initial year of transition. Deacy et al. (2015) and Stack et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of pre- and during-transition supports but also advise that transition support extends well into the post-transition phase to meet the needs of students and promote a successful transition overall.

Furthermore, the educational context of the participants' children seemed to have played a role in this study. For example, Tanisha expressed that much of her frustration stemmed from the limited post-transition support, reporting a complete absence of SLSOs and an unfamiliarity with individualised learning plans. This resonates with existing literature that suggests students on the autism spectrum can often face challenges in accessing support beyond the initial stages of transition (Bruck et al., 2022; Deacy et al., 2015; Kohler, 1996). However, Tanisha's insights may be indicative of broader issues as she is the only participant whose child is enrolled in a rural school in Victoria, whereas the children of the other three participants attend schools in metropolitan New South Wales. For example, studies conducted by Bourke and Waite (2013) and Sullivan et al. (2013) highlight the disparities in access to disability supports between rural and urban areas. Specifically, rural areas have been reported to have limited resources and fewer qualified staff, influencing the effectiveness of the overall transition process. On the other hand, Olive expressed the most satisfaction towards pre- and during-transition support, as extra transition days and effective home-school collaboration support were provided. This could be due to being the only participant with a child enrolled in a learning support class, as the other children were in mainstream classes. This finding is not widely supported in the existing literature. For example, Makin et al. (2017) suggest that transition experiences are not necessarily linked to whether a child is placed in mainstream or learning support classes.

Ultimately, in response to the first research question, parents' insights have revealed that while personalised learning supports and home-school collaboration supports are sometimes provided post-transition, parents may be satisfied or dissatisfied depending on their unique experiences, regional influences, and schooling enrolment type.

Post-Transition Experience

The aim of the second research question was to determine parents' perceptions on *how* their autistic child experiences the post-transition period. The findings predominantly highlighted that parents were concerned about their children's social and emotional wellbeing throughout their transition stages. For example, Olive and Francesca expressed that their children had inconsistent emotional regulation at school, affecting their attendance and behaviour. This aligns with studies by Al-Beltagi (2021), Ratcliffe et al. (2014), and Torrado et al. (2017), which highlight the importance of addressing the social and

emotional needs of children on the autism spectrum because they often experience intensified physiological and psychological changes during adolescence that are often exacerbated by transitions.

Although some parents in the current study observed improvements in their child's social interactions when supported by empathetic teachers, there were more reports of their adolescent children experiencing anxiety, stress, and panic attacks throughout the transition process. These feelings are not dissimilar to typically developing children at this life stage, but children on the autism spectrum may require additional support due to the common characteristics of autism (e.g., reluctant to adapt to unfamiliar situations, difficulties attaining social relationships, sensory sensitivity; APA, 2022). In particular, the current study found that comments associated with masking were prevalent in two parent interviews, both parents of female students (i.e., Emma and Rachel). Research by Gould (2017) and Tomlinson et al. (2020) reveal that females on the autism spectrum mask more frequently and often more effectively than males. This can lead to their needs being unidentified or overlooked by educators and service providers. This raises questions about the gender-related biases in support provision existing in the hidden curriculum of schools. There is growing interest in and research focusing on gender differences in typical characteristics of autism (Bourson & Prevost, 2024; Calderoni, 2023; Napolitano et al., 2022). Addressing gender disparities is crucial for the provision of meaningful transition support to ensure that all students on the autism spectrum, regardless of gender, receive the appropriate adjustments needed to be successful in high school.

Most participants' children presented with at least one other diagnosis in addition to their autism diagnosis. This could have played a role in the way that these young people experienced the post-transition period. Al-Beltagi (2021) argues that although medical comorbidities are more common in children with autism than in the general population, it is critical to consider the child with autism as a whole. As the number of comorbidities accumulates, the intensity of individual treatments and the total number of interventions increase as well (Bauman, 2010; Casanova et al., 2020). Thus, the post-transition experiences of the children, as reported by parents, may not solely reflect autism-related characteristics, but should also consider the presence of other disabilities and learning difficulties.

Furthermore, promoting student agency (e.g., elective subject selection) has emerged as a key finding in this study. Kohler's taxonomy advocates for student-centred planning and agency as essential components of successful transitions (Kohler, 1996; Kohler et al., 2016). Empowering students on the autism spectrum to make informed decisions about their educational pathways can enhance their engagement and reduce anxiety during the post-transition phase (Chandaroo et al., 2018; Tsai et al., 2020). Participating parents expressed that the lack of autonomy and guidance afforded to students when choosing their elective subjects for Year 9 impacted the overall wellbeing of their child. This raises questions about the extent to which students on the autism spectrum are given agency and choice in their schooling life, including the post-transition period. Providing opportunities for students to have a voice in their educational journey aligns with the principles of inclusive education and supports the development of self-determination skills, thus improving the overall transition experience (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

In response to the third research question, parents offered several recommendations to enhance post-transition experiences for students on the autism spectrum. The implementation of school-wide changes, such as creating quiet spaces for students to relax, should be considered. Additionally, parents recommended sustained home-school collaboration into the post-transition period, including better communication and timely responses from schools, which aligns with suggestions in the literature for strengthening school-family partnerships (Deslandes, 2019; Malan, 2022; Talapatra et al., 2019). Teacher-specific recommendations included the need for increased teacher training on neurodiversity and teacher dispositions, such as incorporating kindness, empathy, and effective rapport-building. However, as Donath et al. (2023) argue, professional learning opportunities have not kept pace with the increasing knowledge and skills needed to be an effective educator for students with diverse learning

needs. Teachers must therefore take charge and ownership to develop their own knowledge, dispositions, and behaviours. These parent recommendations at the school, classroom, and teacher-specific levels ultimately offer valuable insights that can inform practical applications and improvements that will increase the overall success of students' transition experiences. Having streamlined policies and processes would increase the effectiveness of transition support for students on the autism spectrum well beyond the initial transition event.

Future Research

There remains a need for additional post-transition research, ensuring that this critical phase is not overshadowed by the emphasis placed on pre- and during-transition support. To gain a holistic understanding of post-transition experiences, future research should actively engage other stakeholders, including classroom teachers, LaSTs, and students on the autism spectrum themselves. Studies should also be conducted to investigate the current opportunities and supports provided by schools to promote and sustain student autonomy, agency, and voice during all stages of transition.

Limitations

Participants were recruited via personal contacts and a social media platform advocating for autism in Australia, potentially leading to sampling bias towards parents who are more proactive in seeking support for their children. Since there was a small sample size of four female parents and participation was voluntary, the findings are unlikely to reflect the perspectives of all parents of high-school-aged students on the autism spectrum. Furthermore, this study defined post-transition as the phase between Years 8 and 11, which is longer than the period defined by some authors in the existing literature. Although the research questions focus specifically on post-transition, parents provided many insights into the pre- and during-transition periods, raising questions about whether transition phases should have such division or if research should be conducted more broadly to avoid isolating exact periods. Nonetheless, exploration of parents' perspectives offered valuable insights into the significance of providing more post-transition supports that are tailored to the unique needs of individual students on the autism spectrum. The current research lays the groundwork for future studies on primary to secondary school transition practices, ultimately questioning policy reform and systemic process changes within Australian schools.

Conclusion

This study hopes to spark critical debate about the personalised learning and home-school collaboration supports that students on the autism spectrum receive post-transition. The exploration of Australian parents' perspectives offers valuable insights into the significance of providing more personalised post-transition supports that are responsive to students' aspirations, goals, and strengths.

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