

REGISTERED REPORT

Factors and experiences that influence school mobility for autistic students: A systematic review

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Abstract

Background: Autistic students are reported to move schools at a high rate, but little is understood about why this is happening. What is known is that the effects of school mobility can negatively impact both short- and long-term outcomes, particularly the child's learning, behaviours, mental health and school retention.

Aims: The aim of this systematic review was to synthesize the research on factors and experiences which influence the family's decision to move their autistic child to another school.

Methods: A protocol was registered with PROPERO (ID: CRD4202120794). Searches were conducted with ERIC, Scopus and Web of Science and seven studies were identified.

Results: The studies focused on three main types of mobility: mainstream-to-mainstream school moves, moving between mainstream and segregated schools, and moving between mainstream and homeschool. Parents' concerns for their child's learning, social experiences and mental health, as well as their own interactions with their child's school, influenced the decision to leave. Whilst there were similarities across the studies for reasons to move, there were also differences based upon the settings between which students moved.

[Correction added on 10 May 2022, after first online publication: CAUL funding statement has been added.]

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Conclusion: The findings highlight the need for further research across all school mobility types to better understand the reasons underpinning high rates of school mobility for autistic students.

KEYWORDS

Autism, school mobility, school transitions, moving schools

INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD; hereafter, autism¹) is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition involving differences in social communication and the presence of restricted and repetitive behaviours and interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Recent statistics have identified that one in 54 children has an autism diagnosis, with 33% having a co-occurring intellectual disability (Maenner et al., 2020). Prevalence estimates vary across the world depending upon socio-cultural/economic, surveillance and organizational factors (Chiarotti & Venerosi, 2020).

Since an international policy shift over the past 27 years towards students with disabilities receiving an inclusive education, an increasing number of autistic students are attending mainstream schools (Frederickson et al., 2010; Snyder et al., 2016). Despite this, many parents consider that mainstream schooling is not working for their autistic child, feeling that staff lack the necessary knowledge, training and resources to include these children effectively (Roberts & Simpson, 2016; Sagers et al., 2018). Options remain available for autistic students to attend segregated settings, such as autism or special schools, yet the research suggests that some parents worry that their child is not receiving a regular education alongside their siblings and typically developing peers, or the academic skills that prepare them for a life beyond school (Mann et al., 2015). In response to an education system where parents consider that their autistic child does not have a place, some choose to homeschool (O'Hagan et al., 2021). Homeschooling can also present challenges for parents who may experience financial and emotional stress whilst educating their child at home (O'Hagan et al., 2021). Given the difficulties in finding an appropriate educational fit for autistic students, it is unsurprising that moving schools is a common experience (Jones et al., 2018).

Moving schools, or school mobility, has been well documented for the general student population, however, this is an underexplored area for autistic students. Emerging evidence indicates that students with a disability, including autism, move schools frequently. Data from a longitudinal study in the US revealed that students identified as having special education needs (e.g., autism, learning, physical, developmental, behavioural/emotional disability) had a 40% greater chance of moving schools between grades 6 (ages 11–12 years) and 8 (ages 13–14 years) than their typically developing peers (Calibuso & Winsler, 2021). Similarly, Jørgensen and Perry (2021) found that in England, special education needs and disabilities is a predictor of mobility, whilst in Utah, USA, a Department of Education report found that 11.7% of students with disabilities had moved contrasted with 8.1% of general education students (Barrat et al., 2014). A Department of Education and Training, Queensland, Australia report (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017) highlighted that in 2015, students with a statement of disability in government schools moved at a greater rate than their peers without a disability, across all year levels. This was particularly high for year 9 students (ages 14–15 years), with 18% of students with a disability having moved compared with 11% without a disability. Given that autism is the largest and fastest growing disability group in Queensland public schools, who account for over 40% of students with a statement of disability (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017), it is likely that autistic students represent a high number of these moves.

¹Identity first language will be used throughout, which is in keeping with the reported preference of the autism community (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021; Bury et al., 2020).

Despite this, only one report (Jones et al., 2018) was found which reported on the rate of school mobility for autistic students. This report, commissioned by an Australian charity which supports autistic people and their families, included a survey of 1297 families/carers of autistic children who live in the state of Victoria. One in four reported that a family member or person they care for had moved schools, with this being more common for secondary students (44%) than primary students (19%). A lack of school support was cited as the reason for these moves.

School mobility for students with special education needs may be influenced by additional factors. Previous research with parents who have elected to move schools for their child with a disability, including autism, found they did so after experiencing obstacles such as an alienating school culture, parent and child stress (Mann et al., 2018; Mitchelson et al., 2021), poor home–school relationships and a lack of individualized programming and inclusive practices (Kluth et al., 2007). Autistic students themselves have also commented on their experiences in mainstream schools which has led to moving, particularly after a formal exclusion. Students reported feeling challenged by the sensory environment, experienced bullying and social isolation, and felt misunderstood and unsupported by staff (Brede et al., 2017; Goodall, 2019; Sproston et al., 2017). There may also be factors that are yet to be explored in the autism or disability school mobility literature. For example, a systematic review on school mobility in the US found that up to 40% of the general student population who move, change schools for school-related or school climate reasons, including adverse social and academic environments, personal safety issues and disciplinary action (Welsh, 2017).

Although the problem and effect of school mobility is underexplored for autistic students, the extant literature on school mobility in the general student population shows that school mobility negatively impacts both short- and long-term academic and social outcomes, particularly for vulnerable students (Welsh, 2017). A school move has been found to hinder academic learning and the development of social networks (Boon, 2011). Highly mobile students are more likely to experience mental health problems, to develop challenging behaviour, to be suspended and to drop out of school (Grigg, 2012; Welsh, 2017). Given that autistic students already experience challenges at school, the breakdown of their placement and having to move schools has the potential to have an even greater impact on their social, academic and emotional outcomes. Therefore, autism-specific research on school mobility is needed to understand both the students and parents' experiences which influence this decision, the decision-making process itself and the outcomes of mobility on students and families.

There has been a recent thematic synthesis review on research relating to parents of autistic students who have moved their child from the mainstream and into homeschooling (O'Hagan et al., 2021). The review found that the move into homeschooling can offer the child a flexible and individualized experience, and was associated with good social, academic and mental health outcomes. However, the focus was on homeschooling rather than the broader experience of school mobility. Moving from a mainstream to homeschool is only one possible type of school move autistic students can make, so the current review aimed to explore different types of family-initiated mobility, and factors and experiences exclusively related to autistic students.

As research indicates that students with a disability are at greater risk of moving than general education students, and that movement for autistic students may be especially high, this review is relevant and timely. Through synthesizing the literature on factors and experiences which influence the family's choice to move their autistic child to a new school, more can be understood about this phenomenon than from single studies only. A systematic synthesis approach facilitates integrating the findings of empirical studies, aids in finding gaps in the literature and highlights areas for research, practice and policy. Therefore, this review aimed to explore school mobility where parents had agency over the choice to move their child, and any decisions were made by them. This will be answered through this question: What factors or experiences do these studies identify as influencing a family's decision to move their autistic child between schools? This study has important implications for relevant stakeholders, including autistic students and their families, educators and education departments.

METHOD

The protocol for this systematic review was registered online with PROSPERO, an international register for systematic reviews (Registration number: CRD420212079). Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) standards were followed. The primary researcher leading the review is a PhD candidate who has completed general research training as well as training/workshops specifically on systematic reviews. The two co-authors have both attended research training on systematic reviews as well as publishing multiple systematic reviews in the areas of autism and/or neurodisability (e.g., Adams, Young, & Keen, 2019).

Search strategy

The Cochrane Library and PROSPERO database were searched to ensure that no other meta-analyses or systematic reviews covering the topic of this systematic review were registered or in progress. The electronic databases ERIC, Scopus and Web of Science were searched in March 2021. The search was limited to peer reviewed articles published in English from 1994 onwards (to align with the year in which Asperger's disorder was included into the DSM-IV). Non-peer-reviewed and grey literature was excluded. Search strings included terms relating to autism, school setting and school mobility (see Table 1). After running an initial search and reviewing the results, the proximity operator 'NEAR' was added to the search terms. This accounted for the number of words that may separate each term and resulted in a more precise and sensitive search. The participants' search string was combined with school setting and school mobility search strings using the Boolean 'AND'.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Articles were included in this review if they met the following criteria: (a) the study must have reported original research using a recognized methodology; (b) the study must have reported on individuals with a diagnosis of autism, ASD, autistic disorder, Asperger's syndrome or PDD-NOS; (c) the study must have reported factors or experiences which led to a parent/caregiver or the family making the decision to move out of a school/educational setting and into another school/educational setting (e.g., mainstream-to-mainstream, special school to homeschool); (d) factors or experiences that were reported in the study were identified in data collected from parents, caregivers,

TABLE 1 Search terms

Category	Search terms*
Participants	Autis* OR asperger* OR ASD OR disabilit* OR PDD-NOS OR "special needs"
School setting	Homeschool* OR "home educat*" OR School* NEAR/0 (home OR mainstream OR special OR charter OR autis*) OR Alternative NEAR/2 (school* OR provision* OR educat*) OR Placement* NEAR/1 (educat* OR school*)
School mobility	Student NEAR/2 (migrat* OR mobil* OR transfer* OR mov* OR chang*) OR School* NEAR/2 (chang* OR transfer* OR migrat* OR mobility OR mov*)

Note: Proximity operator 'NEAR' was used for Web of Science and ERIC searches, and 'W' was used for the Scopus search.

students or educators; and (e) the study must have reported on movement between any type of educational setting which occurred during the primary or secondary school years (i.e., when the student was aged 5–18 years).

Articles were excluded on the following bases: (a) the study reported on structurally mandated moves into primary education, primary to secondary education, and secondary to postsecondary education; (b) the study reported on moves relating to a permanent school exclusion or a permanent school closure; and (c) if part of a larger sample, autistic students were not reported separately.

Review strategy

The electronic database searches returned 5749 records, and 4154 records remained after duplicates were removed (see [Figure 1](#)). The titles and abstracts were evaluated by the primary researcher against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Studies were either included for full text review or excluded. A second rater, who was blind to the primary researcher's ratings, evaluated a random 20% sample ($n = 831$) of the records, with no disagreements. The 17 studies identified for full-text review were reviewed independently by two raters. Seven studies met all the criteria for inclusion in the systematic review. The primary researcher and second rater both identified a potential eighth study for inclusion which met four out of the five inclusion criteria; however, it did not meet the fifth criterion as there was a lack of clarity as to whether a recognized methodology had been used, as this was not detailed in the paper. The study did not state the methods used to gather data, identify the procedure or analyse the data. An email was sent to the author of the study for confirmation of the methodological approach, but a response was not received after 3 months. As a recognized methodology could not be identified it was agreed to omit the paper. Six studies reported on school mobility, however, these included moves that were managed by the school or district and were excluded as parents did not have agency over the decision. A further two studies were excluded as autistic students were not reported separately, and one study included students that were not aged 5–18 years at the time of the move. Although three studies ([Hurlbutt, 2011](#); [Lilley, 2015](#); [Rubenstein et al., 2015](#)) reported on students outside of the age range, the experiences which led to moving schools occurred when those students were school aged and so the articles were included. Forward and backward searches of included articles, using the articles' reference lists and Google Scholar, did not identify any additional studies which met the inclusion criteria.

Data extraction and synthesis

Data were extracted for each study by the primary researcher. Data extracted included geographic location of the study, research aims and questions, sample characteristics (e.g., number of participants, demographics, year level at the time of moving), research approach/design and type of school migration. Findings from each study in relation to the key reasons and experiences leading to school mobility as reported by the authors were extracted verbatim.

A thematic synthesis approach ([Thomas & Harden, 2008](#)) was used to analyse and synthesize the extracted data. This involved a three-step process of coding each line of the text, developing themes and analysing the themes. Firstly, the different types of moves made by students were identified, and extracted data were grouped for each of these moves. The extracts were inductively coded based upon factors and experiences leading to the family's decision to move. Based upon these codes, a concept map was created for each direction of movement between educational settings. Subthemes were created and named for move types with multiple concepts. For each move type and subtheme, similarities and differences in reasons and experiences leading to mobility were summarized. These summaries informed the findings of the report.

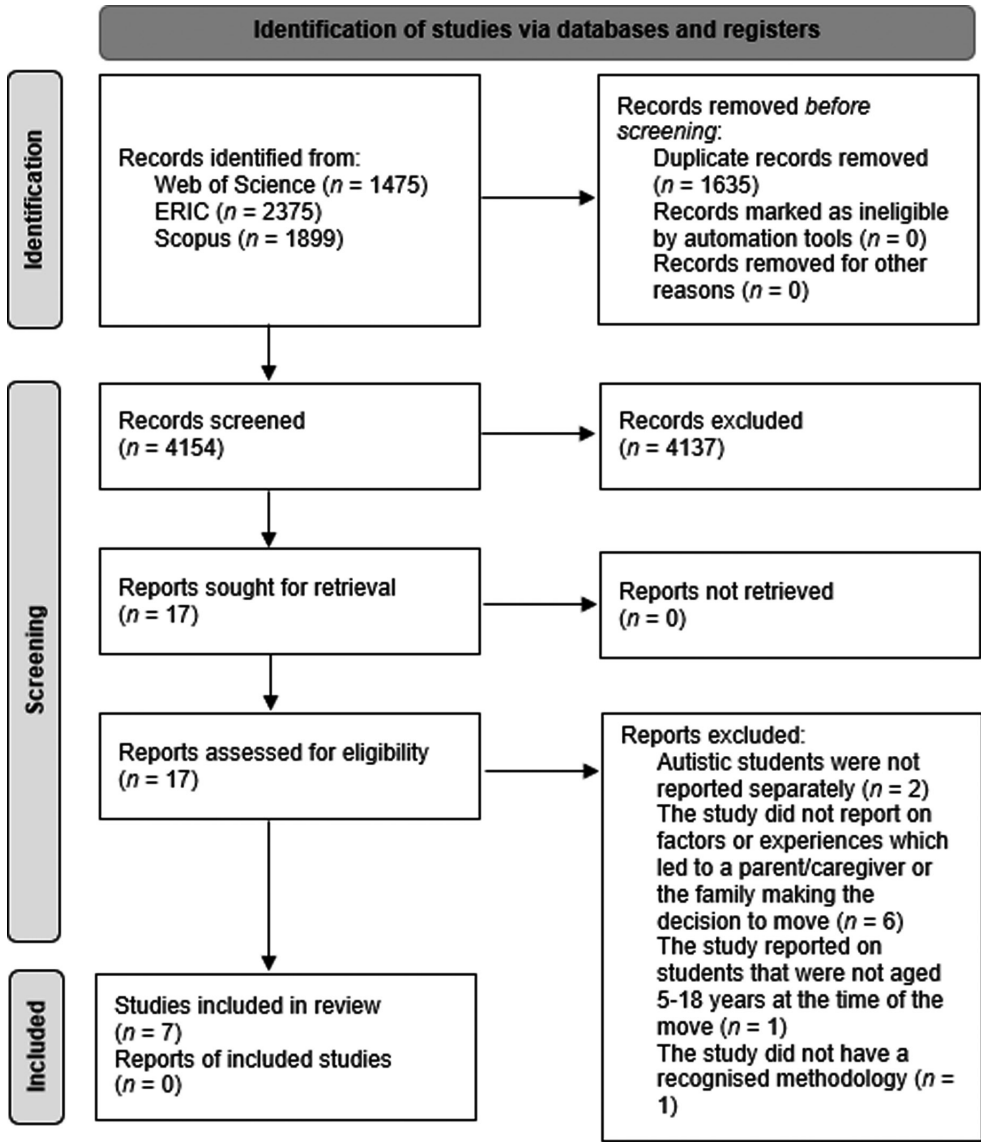


FIGURE 1 PRISMA flowchart of screening process (Page et al., 2021)

Assessment of study quality

The methodological quality of studies included in this review was evaluated using the Quality Assessment Tool for Studies with Diverse Designs (QATSDD; Sirriyeh et al., 2012). The QATSDD was developed to assess qualitative, quantitative and mixed method research designs. There are 16 criteria in this tool, of which all 16 apply to mixed methods studies, 14 apply to qualitative studies and 14 apply to quantitative studies. Each description can receive a score ranging between 0 and 3, with a maximum overall score of 48 for mixed methods and a maximum overall score of 42 for qualitative and quantitative studies. A calculation of the percentage of the maximum score is used to compare the quality of the studies. The tool has been piloted by health researchers with good inter-rater reliability (Sirriyeh et al., 2012).

TABLE 2 Studies included in the review

Author	Focus	Country	<i>N</i> mobile students reported on	Informant	Parent education
Bower (2021)	Autism, bullying, discrimination, mainstream schooling and homeschooling	Northern Ireland	1	2 mothers 1 student	Not reported
Hurlbutt (2011)	Experiences of parents who homeschool their autistic children	USA	8	6 mothers 1 father	PhD: <i>n</i> = 1 Master: <i>n</i> = 2 Bachelor: <i>n</i> = 3 Technical: <i>n</i> = 1
Kidd and Kaczmarek (2010)	Mothers' experiences of homeschooling their autistic children	Australia	13	10 mothers	Not reported
Lilley (2015)	The reasons mothers elected to move their autistic child between different educational settings during the early years of primary school	Australia	8	8 mothers	Postgraduate: <i>n</i> = 1 Bachelor: <i>n</i> = 4 TAFE: <i>n</i> = 2 Year 12: <i>n</i> = 1
McDonald and Lopes (2014)	Parent experiences with home educating their child with the support of a school of isolated and distance education	Australia	2	2 mothers	Not reported
Rubenstein et al. (2015)	The experiences of parents of gifted autistic students and their struggle with finding appropriate educational experiences	USA	10	10 parents	Not reported
Simmons and Campbell (2019)	Parents' decisions around moving their child from the mainstream to homeschool	USA	9	9 parents	Ranging from high school diploma to doctoral degree; two parents had a certificate or degree in teaching; two parents had formal training in autism

RESULTS

Study characteristics

Overall, seven studies were included in the review (see Table 2). The studies were conducted in Australia (*n* = 3), Northern Ireland (*n* = 1) and the United States (*n* = 3). Studies reported on school mobility between mainstream schools and homeschooling (*n* = 6), with only two studies reporting on different move types between autism-specific special schools (herein, autism schools), special schools, and regular or support classes in mainstream schools. Data were collected via interviews in all the studies, with thematic analysis (*n* = 5), constant comparative method (*n* = 1), and grounded theory (*n* = 1) used to analyse the data.

Participant characteristics

Participants in six of the studies were recruited using purposive sampling, with one study not identifying the recruitment strategy (see Table 2). A total of 48 parents reported on 51 students who had moved schools, with the majority—in the studies which reported gender—being male. Rubenstein et al. (2015) reported that 10 of the 13 students in their study had moved schools but did not identify

Parent socio-economic status	Age range/ % male of mobile students	Recruitment strategy	Method and analytic approach	Types of school mobility reported on
Not reported	Age not reported $m = 100\%$	Generic purposive sampling	Interview Thematic analysis	Mainstream school–homeschool
Not reported	8–25 years $m = 87.5\%$	Purposeful random sampling	Interviews Thematic analysis	Mainstream–mainstream Mainstream–homeschool Homeschool–mainstream
Not reported	8–14 years Gender not specified	Purposeful random sampling	Interviews Thematic content analysis	Mainstream–homeschool
Meeting basic needs: $n = 2$ Financially adequate: $n = 4$ Good financial condition: $n = 2$	4–6 years $m = 100\%$	Not reported	Interviews and email communication Thematic narrative analysis	Mainstream–segregated (special or autism school) Autism school–mainstream Mainstream–mainstream
Not reported	Age range unclear $m = 100\%$	Purposive sampling	Interviews, participant observation, document data sources Constructivist grounded theory	Mainstream–homeschool Mainstream–mainstream
Not reported	Unclear	Purposive sampling	Interviews Thematic analysis	Mainstream–mainstream Mainstream–homeschool
Not reported	9–15 years $m = 66.7\%$	Purposive sampling	Interviews Constant comparative method	Mainstream–homeschool

which of these students had moved; therefore, parent and child characteristics are unclear. Only Bower (2021) included the student voice, with the remaining studies relying upon parent informants (28 mothers and one father), with parent gender not specified in two studies. One study reported parent socioeconomic status and two studies reported parent education, with 14 parents holding a tertiary qualification.

Methodological rigour

Reporting and methodological rigour of the seven papers were assessed using the QATSDD independently by HM and KS (for scores, see [Supplementary Material](#)). Krippendorff's alpha test was used (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007) to estimate the inter-rater reliability. The results showed that the reliability was high ($\alpha = 0.9786$). The researchers then consulted to compare results and came to a consensus on scores. One study (Rubenstein et al., 2015) scored highly on the QATSDD (85.71%), with five studies scoring between 54.76% and 66.67% (Hurlbutt, 2011; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Lilley, 2015; McDonald & Lopes, 2014; Simmons & Campbell, 2019) and one study scoring below 50% (Bower, 2021). Due to the limited number of papers on school mobility in autism, studies were not excluded based upon quality. Overall, all studies provided a clear description of the study aims and research setting. However, only one study included evidence of user design, and evidence of sample size considered in the analysis

was missing in four studies, with three studies providing basic information only. Strengths and limitations were reported in three of the seven studies.

FINDINGS: FACTORS AND EXPERIENCES THAT INFLUENCE SCHOOL MOBILITY

School mobility was reported across a range of school setting types, and some students were highly mobile. One study (Lilley, 2015) reported specifically on the number of moves each student had made. Of the eight students, six had moved once, one child had moved twice, and one child had moved three times, all within the first 3 years of primary school. This included mobility between mainstream, autism and special schools. Three studies (Hurlbutt, 2011; McDonald & Lopes, 2014; Rubenstein et al., 2015) also indicated (through parent quotes) that students were highly mobile and had moved between a range of school settings such as homeschool, charter, mainstream and special schools, with one parent noting her child had moved four times (Rubenstein et al., 2015).

Common experiences reported that led to school mobility included issues around a lack of educator understanding of autism, social support and resourcing, as well as poor home–school relationships. To explain these in more detail, the factors and experiences which led to school mobility are reported for the different settings students moved between, with some studies covering different types of mobility. Although Rubenstein et al. (2015) reported experiences leading to school mobility, the focus of this study was on the educational experiences of gifted autistic students, and the types of settings students had moved between were not easily identified. However, this study did highlight the difficulties parents experienced in having their child's unique learning abilities understood, which led to a high frequency of school moves for 10 of the 13 students in the study.

The types of school mobility which are reported on (below) include mainstream-to-mainstream school moves, moving between mainstream schools and segregated placements, and moving between mainstream schools and homeschool. Mainstream schools refer to regular classes within a mainstream school unless otherwise stated (i.e., mainstream with support and satellite units within mainstream schools). Segregated placements refer to autism or special schools.

Mainstream-to-mainstream school moves

Four studies (Hurlbutt, 2011; Lilley, 2015; McDonald & Lopes, 2014; Rubenstein et al., 2015) identified reasons for which autistic students had moved between mainstream schools. As the focus of three of these studies was outside of school mobility (Hurlbutt, 2011; McDonald & Lopes, 2014; Rubenstein et al., 2015), the reasons for this type of move were only mentioned briefly. The reasons for moving a student mainstream to mainstream varied across the four studies and these findings must be interpreted within the context of each reason only being mentioned by a small number of parents. Parents indicated that they had moved their child after experiencing a lack of inclusive practice and peer bullying ($n = 2$; McDonald & Lopes, 2014), and the school recommending leaving because they could not provide support ($n = 1$; Hurlbutt, 2011). One mother chose to move her son after feeling that his abilities were being underestimated and that he was being forced into a support class, so he was enrolled in a school in a district which she felt had a more inclusive philosophy (Rubenstein et al., 2015). Lilley (2015) reported that one parent had a range of experiences which led to consideration of moving, such as feeling undervalued by her child's teachers, needing to augment resources and an overuse of punitive behaviour management; however, the specific reason for leaving was not mentioned.

Moving between mainstream schools and segregated placements

Lilley (2015) was the only study that explored parent experiences of moving their child between mainstream and segregated schools, or vice versa. The types of mainstream placements included mainstream classes with support and satellite units (i.e., disability or autism support class) within the mainstream school. Five mothers had moved their child away from a mainstream school and into a special school or an autism school within the first 3 years of primary school. Experiences which led to consideration of leaving included a lack of individualized programming and support, under-resourcing and the use of reactive approaches to behaviour management. The mothers also reported a lack of communication and consultation from their school and felt that their input was being undervalued or ignored. Illustrative examples provided by Lilley for the reasons parents chose to leave the mainstream included the use of reactive approaches to behaviour ($n = 2$), a decline in their child's mental health ($n = 2$), a lack of inclusive practice ($n = 2$) and being advised by a therapist or school staff to leave ($n = 1$). Three mothers decided to move their child into an autism school believing that it would have better resourcing and staff trained in autism. Three mothers had moved their child from a segregated setting and into a mainstream school within the first 3 years of primary school. Lilley only detailed the reasons for doing so for two mothers, both of whom had moved their child from an autism school to a mainstream school. Factors included a lack of academic programming and the effect that other students' challenging behaviours were having on their child's behaviours or mental health. Despite special education staff advising against the move, parents made the decision to move into a mainstream school as they wanted their child to be educated in a more inclusive setting.

Moving between mainstream schools and homeschool

With six of the seven included studies reporting on parents moving their child away from the mainstream and into homeschooling, this was the most reported on type of school move. The experiences or factors which led to moving into homeschooling were not reported in one study (Rubenstein et al., 2015); therefore, only five studies will be included in the following synthesis. Hurlbutt (2011) reported that the only reason one parent moved their child from homeschool into mainstream was the pressure they felt from the school district to enrol in a public school; therefore, this single report is not included in the following synthesis. Furthermore, this reason was only mentioned briefly in the study.

From the five studies reporting on the reasons for moving a child between mainstream and homeschool settings, four key factors or reasons impacting the parent or family's decision were identified: the child's academic programming and learning, the child's social experiences and safety, the child's behaviour and mental health and parents' experiences with their child's school and family stress.

The child's academic programming and learning

Parents across all five studies expressed concerns that their child's school was not providing academic programming that supported their ability. Parents felt that teachers were overestimating their child's ability in some areas (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010), or providing individualized programming that did not meet their learning abilities (Bower, 2021; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; McDonald & Lopes, 2014). An absence of appropriate programming that was agreed upon between schools and parents led to some parents moving their child, with one parent having been told that her daughter would have access to individualized time with teachers but that instead she "spent 80% of her time with a para [teacher aide], and 20% with the supervising teacher" (Parent; Hurlbutt, 2011, p. 241). Parents felt that teachers' limited understanding of autism, inadequate support and accommodations, and suspensions were leading to their child's academic underachievement and a regression of skills (Hurlbutt, 2011; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010). The decision to homeschool was made as parents believed that only they could

provide their child with the individualized programming and support that had been lacking in their mainstream school (Hurlbutt, 2011; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010).

The child's social experiences and safety

Five studies found that children had been socially isolated and/or bullied at their school by both peers and teachers (Bower, 2021; Hurlbutt, 2011; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; McDonald & Lopes, 2014; Simmons & Campbell, 2019). Parents reported that their child had been assaulted by other students (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; McDonald & Lopes, 2014; Simmons & Campbell, 2019), subjected to humiliation by teachers (Bower, 2021), and restrained by staff (Hurlbutt, 2011) and one child had been locked in “a little bitty closet with nothing in it” (Parent; Simmons & Campbell, 2019, p. 337). Some parents also felt that the school did little to protect their child's safety, such as not responding to bullying incidents (Bower, 2021; Simmons & Campbell, 2019), inadequate supervision during unstructured periods (Simmons & Campbell, 2019) and insufficient support for the child's social inclusion (Bower, 2021). Across two studies, specific incidents (e.g., assault, elopement) led to parents choosing to homeschool their child, feeling that this was a safer environment (McDonald & Lopes, 2014; Simmons & Campbell, 2019).

The child's behaviour and mental health

Parents across four studies reported that their child's reactions to their school experiences (e.g., punitive behaviour management, poor social understanding and bullying) led to their exhibiting externalizing behaviours, such as perceived misbehaviour during class and meltdowns at school and at home (Bower, 2021; Hurlbutt, 2011; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Simmons & Campbell, 2019). Kidd and Kaczmarek (2010) found that nine of the 10 parents in their study discussed how their child would internalize their anxiety during the school day, but then release this at home. One parent stated that every day her son would, “come home from school and after he'd yelled and screamed and threw his bag and punched me, he'd then go to bed and cry himself to sleep and sleep for 2 to 3 hours” (Parent; p. 264). A decline in the child's mental health as a result of their school experiences was highlighted across all studies that reported a move between mainstream and homeschool settings, with parents identifying that their child had developed anxiety or depression, including expressing suicidal thoughts (McDonald & Lopes, 2014) and self-harming (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Simmons & Campbell, 2019). The child's mental health was often the catalyst for leaving, with homeschool being the only option after parents or the child's therapist considered the child had experienced too much emotional trauma in a mainstream setting (Bower, 2021; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; McDonald & Lopes, 2014; Simmons & Campbell, 2019).

Parents' experiences with their child's school and family stress

Parents across three studies reported ongoing negative interactions with their child's school (Bower, 2021; Hurlbutt, 2011; Simmons & Campbell, 2019). Experiences included disagreements with staff about the child's programming (Hurlbutt, 2011; Simmons & Campbell, 2019), a lack of home-school collaboration (Simmons & Campbell, 2019) and staff not responding to parents' concerns (Bower, 2021). The constant need to advocate for their child and to provide additional academic support, as well as concerns for their child's mental health, was placing additional stress upon parents and their families, with parents noting feeling frustrated, in tears and worn out (Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Simmons & Campbell, 2019). The overwhelming time and effort spent supporting their child and dealing with their mainstream school led to the decision to homeschool (Simmons & Campbell, 2019).

DISCUSSION

This is the first systematic review to synthesize the literature which reports on factors or experiences which influence the family's decision to move their autistic child between schools. Despite reports highlighting that school mobility is common for autistic students, only seven studies on school mobility in autism—all of which were qualitative interview studies—met the inclusion criteria. The most common type of school move, identified in six of the seven included studies, was from mainstream to home-school. There was little exploration of segregated to mainstream moves, and even less on mainstream-to-mainstream mobility. Only one study (Lilley, 2015) exclusively explored school mobility and autism, but this was limited to movement between mainstream and specialist schools, and vice versa, and only reported on these moves occurring during the early years of primary school. In the remaining studies, school mobility was not the focus of the research. To date, factors or experiences reported which led to school mobility were mostly negative, sometimes occurring across multiple schools and frequently occurring after a decline in the child's mental health. Given these preliminary findings, there is a strong need for further research which specifically focuses upon the reasons for school mobility and how these may be similar or different across a range of move types.

The impact of the child's school experience on their mental health was a key factor leading to school mobility in all move types, except for mainstream to mainstream. There was little information on mainstream school mobility; however, previous research has shown that autistic students' mainstream school experiences which lead to mobility, particularly around bullying from peers and staff, can affect their mental health (Brede et al., 2017; Mitchelson et al., 2021). Bullying was mentioned across all move types in this review, with parents' concerns for their child's safety being a priority in their decision to leave their placement (e.g., Lilley, 2015; Simmons & Campbell, 2019). Autistic students are at a higher risk of being bullied than students with other disabilities or typically developing students, with estimates for bullying victimization being 67% (Park et al., 2020). Serious consequences of bullying exposure have been reported for autistic students, including damaged self-esteem, high anxiety, self-harm, depression and suicide (Chou et al., 2020; Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Holden et al., 2020; Reid & Batten, 2006). The weight of this issue cannot be underestimated, and schools and education departments should remain vigilant in addressing this problem.

Parents' ongoing negative experiences with their child's school was also a factor which contributed to the decision to move. The studies which focused upon mainstream to homeschool mobility, and the study on moving between mainstream and segregated placements, highlighted the emotional cost of parents' disempowering relationships with schools (e.g., Bower, 2021; Simmons & Campbell, 2019), the ongoing need to advocate for their child (e.g., Lilley, 2015) and dealing with their child's mental health (e.g., Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010). Although parents of autistic students have been shown to be skilled negotiators in advocating for their child's education, and especially in securing additional funding for support (Lilley, 2015) and other services (Kurth et al., 2020), this may affect their emotional well-being. Parental stress has been associated with the additional responsibilities of parenting a child with special needs (Scorgie, 2015), with stress being higher in parents of autistic children than in parents of children with other disabilities (Adams et al., 2018) and neurotypical children (Hayes & Watson, 2013). Parental anxiety and well-being have also been linked to child anxiety (Adams & Emerson, 2020), and can interact with other outcomes including marital problems, negative self-perception of their parenting, fatigue and the use of maladaptive coping strategies (i.e., avoidance, disengagement; Giallo et al., 2013; Lai et al., 2015). Given that parents of autistic children report barriers to accessing support for themselves (Seymour et al., 2020; Zablotzky et al., 2013) and for their child (Crane et al., 2019), this highlights the importance of considering child, family and systemic factors when understanding child and family well-being in autism.

Parents' decisions to move their child often stemmed from their child's emotions or feelings linked to school experiences, for example, the child feeling unsafe, anxious or unsupported. These experiences shaped the objectives parents had for their child's education, and, therefore, the type of setting they choose to move into. This is consistent with previous research on school choice, with a systematic

review (Byrne, 2013) finding that parents of students with disabilities choose schools based upon experiences in previous schools; if this has not been positive, then they are more likely to enrol in a different type of provision. However, when choosing a school, parents often consider their child's abilities and support needs, as well as seeking placements that offer flexible, nurturing and inclusive environments that balance life and academic skills (McNerney et al., 2015). Previous research has found that whilst decisions around moving and choosing a new school, for any parent, are primarily rational, with parents weighing the benefits and costs of a move, there is also (understandably) an emotional component (Cucchiara, 2013; Mann et al., 2015; Mitchelson et al., 2021). This is evident in this review, with parents considering the best interests of their child and family, whilst also being influenced by their own stress and worries for their child's safety and mental well-being.

There are other factors leading to school mobility for autistic students, notably school exclusions (Brede et al., 2017; Martin-Denham, 2022; Sproston et al., 2017). Whilst there are similarities in experiences which lead to mobility between elective and exclusionary moves, child behaviours are the key reason leading to an exclusion, with the decision made by school leaders (e.g., Brede et al., 2017). In contrast to this, an important finding of this review is that parents' decisions around moving schools were influenced by factors both external and internal to the family. The findings of this review are also consistent with a recent study on mainstream school mobility in autism (Mitchelson et al., 2021) in which decisions around moving were well considered and influenced by a range of personal and practical considerations, such as the impact of school-based issues on the family's time, finances and well-being, as well as the quality or availability of alternative schools. This highlights that even though those parents who elect to move schools for their child may have felt a negative push away from their school, this push is only one factor influencing parents' decisions. Therefore, given that parents consider a range of factors when making decisions around leaving a school, they have agency as they make rational choices and act with intentionality in response to their situation (Tran & Vu, 2018). Once a broader literature base has been established, future reviews may wish to include literature on moves based on nonfamily decisions, such as exclusions and out of area placements, and identify differences and commonalities between experiences.

The findings of this systematic review are also concordant with issues raised in a thematic synthesis review on home education and autism (O'Hagan et al., 2021). Similar subthemes emerged for the experiences and factors leading to the move between the mainstream and homeschool in both studies, despite this current review covering only four of the 10 studies from the O'Hagan et al. (2021) synthesis, as they included studies with mixed aetiology of disability (at least 50% with an autism diagnosis) and dissertations, which this current review does not. The similarity in subthemes included issues around programming and educational outcomes, responses to behaviour, bullying and mental health, and family stress. This suggests that such issues may be pervasive across disability groups and has been noted in other studies on the school experience of students with disabilities (Kluth et al., 2007; Young et al., 2021). Many of these same factors were also identified in this current review as reasons leading to leaving the mainstream to attend a segregated setting or another mainstream school. Therefore, these factors may be in part related to mainstream schools' implementation of inclusive educational policy, not just for autistic students but for students with a disability generally. This gap in policy and practice is an area which education departments could further explore to reduce the problem of school mobility.

The findings indicate that the school experiences of some autistic students place them and their families at greater risk of stress and anxiety, and lead to feeling pushed towards moving into a different school. Given that school mobility, and especially high mobility, in the general student population can impact academic, social, emotional and vocational outcomes (Welsh, 2017), and that most autistic students already experience these difficulties at school (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017), there is a need to develop a deeper understanding of the factors which both lead to and prevent school mobility in autism. These can then inform policy as well as practice, for example, by informing school-based programmes that may help resolve this problem.

The limited literature has suggested a range of factors can lead to the family decision to move their child to another school, and for some families this may be one factor but for others it may be

cumulative. However, the small number of studies and participants limits what is currently known. The current research suggests that addressing school mobility may be complicated given the different settings students can attend and the potential variability in reasons for moving. Previous research exploring mobility in the general student population has identified factors that may reduce school mobility, such as schools creating a positive and safe school climate (Capp & Sullivan, 2020), and building relationships with students and their families to increase a sense of school connectedness, although this has not been well tested and results are modest (Fiel et al., 2013). To date, no studies have explored factors which can reduce school mobility for autistic students, although some studies (e.g., Roberts & Webster, 2020) suggest whole-school approaches or interventions to support autistic students could be implanted and their impact on school mobility monitored. The use of autism-specific evaluation tools by schools may also reveal gaps in practice that can then be used to guide necessary change (e.g., Adams, MacDonald, et al., 2019) or as areas for skill development and enhancement in each setting.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This review aimed to answer the research question on factors and experiences influencing family-initiated school mobility for autistic students. Although this review provided an emerging insight into this issue, the number of published studies is small, and the results may not represent all families' experiences with school mobility. Furthermore, the ability to extrapolate data from a small number of total participants ($n = 49$) is hindered, especially given that as many as one in 54 children are autistic. The methodological rigour of the studies in this review also highlights a need for quality research in this area, with only one study considered high quality and one study scoring below 50% on the QATSDD.

As highlighted, school mobility in autism is a complex issue given the variety of school options available, and the diverse reasons leading to mobility. However, little is understood about this phenomenon. Even though most autistic students attend mainstream schools, movement between mainstream settings is underexplored. In this review, the studies were predominantly conducted in the United States and Australia; little is known about the extent to which school mobility is a ubiquitous issue for autistic students and if contributing factors are generalized across cultures and socioeconomic status.

This review did not include grey literature, publications not in English or studies including managed moves and exclusions, and, therefore, may not provide a comprehensive account of school mobility or represent all reasons for school mobility. Additionally, the voices of educators are notably missing; female students and students with a disability are under-represented; and only one study included the voice of one student. Autistic students can describe their school experiences and have done so in the research literature (Goodall, 2019; Wood, 2020). Their voice needs to be considered in the literature on school mobility to increase our understanding of their lived experiences leading to moving, involvement in the decision-making process and perspectives of the impacts of moving to a new school. By combining multiple informants from across the autism community, a more holistic understanding of issues leading to school mobility can be achieved (Adams, Young, Simpson, et al., 2019).

The focus of this systematic review was on experiences which influence the family's decision to move. A move does not always guarantee the desired outcome; research on school mobility in autism has found that the child's experiences in a new school setting can be positive or negative (Mitchelson et al., 2021; O'Hagan et al., 2021). A move into a school with a welcoming and inclusive culture can improve academic, social and emotional outcomes for autistic students, as well as parent well-being (Mitchelson et al., 2021; O'Hagan et al., 2021). Conversely, parents may find similar problems at a new school, and this can lead to further mobility (Lilley, 2015; Mitchelson et al., 2021; Rubenstein et al., 2015) and mental health problems (Mitchelson et al., 2021). Further research is needed to understand outcomes for autistic students and their families after a move, as well as the frequency of school moves being made.

CONCLUSION

Parents' decisions to move schools for their child is influenced by not only the child's school experiences and mental health but also parents' own experiences with their child's school and resultant well-being. Understanding school mobility is complicated by the variety of schools autistic students may attend and the types of moves that can be made. Further research is required to understand factors leading to school mobility in order to provide more support for autistic students and to find ways to address this issue.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no known conflict of interest to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Hayley Mitchelson: Conceptualisation; Methodology; Writing - original draft. Dawn Adams: Conceptualisation; Writing - review and editing. Kate Simpson: Conceptualisation; Writing - review and editing.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no data sets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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