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# The perceptions of Autistic school students of their well-being at school: a meta-synthesis

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## ABSTRACT

Students identifying as autistic, whose numbers have grown rapidly in recent years, often encounter a lack of understanding from teachers and peers at school, and face high levels of bullying and interpersonal abuse. Increasing knowledge of autistic students' own understanding of their wellbeing is important for developing appropriate intervention strategies to support their school experience. In this meta-synthesis, 22 in-depth qualitative studies of 10–14-year-old students' perspectives on their wellbeing at school were systematically analysed. The 225 students in these studies were mostly male and from resource-rich countries. Three synthesised findings were identified: first, autistic students' wellbeing is connected to positive relationships at school; second, autistic students' wellbeing at school centres around their self-identity; and third, the experience of school environments impacts autistic students' wellbeing. Findings suggest first, that schools need to support the development of positive relationships between autistic students, their peers and teachers; second, that schools need to respond to how autistic students identify themselves and provide support appropriate to that identity; and third, that autistic students' sensory needs need to be better supported through improved school design. Implications for practice include development of rights-based approaches and privileging autistic students' own ideas about wellbeing and inclusion at school.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Autism; Schools; Students; Wellbeing

## 1. Introduction

Autism is a complex neurodevelopmental condition, characterised by a diverse spectrum of attributes in social interaction and communication, and often repetitive patterns of behaviour, interest and activities (APA 2013). Recognition of autism has increased greatly in recent years. In their systematic review of 71 prevalence studies, Zeidan et al. (2022) report that globally for children aged 0–18 years the median autism prevalence rate between 2012 and 2021 was 1.0%, with rates of diagnosed autism generally increasing

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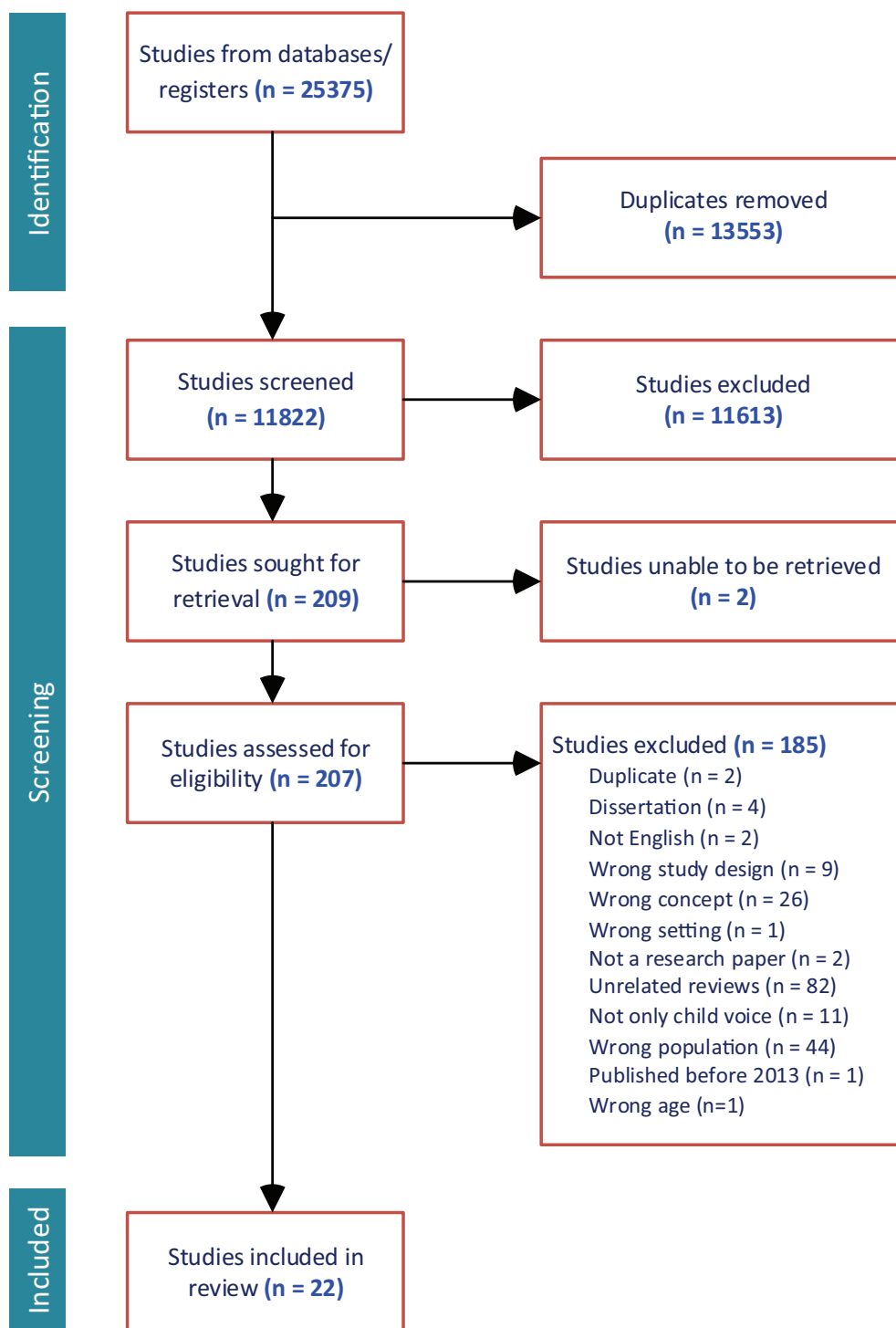


Figure 1. Modified PRISMA diagram illustrating selection results.

**Table 1.** Selection criteria and process.

| Selection criteria     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Phenomenon of interest | <p>Autistic students' perceptions of own wellbeing defined as encompassing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical, social, cognitive, psychological (Pollard and Lee 2003); material (Minkkinen 2013), at individual, social and cultural levels (Camfield, Streuli, and Woodhead 2010).</li> <li>• Personal security, secure attachments, social confidence.</li> <li>• Self-esteem, self-concept.</li> <li>• Agency, self-efficacy, positive outlook.</li> <li>• Stress, general health.</li> </ul> |
| Population             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School students, aged 10–14 years (or in analogous school year level).</li> <li>• Diagnosed with ASD or identified with autism.</li> <li>• Mixed diagnosis samples: 50%+ autistic.</li> <li>• Mixed age groups: 50%+ aged 10–14.</li> <li>• Mixed school levels: 50%+ primary/secondary.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Context                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primary and secondary schools (mainstream, specialist, home schooling).</li> <li>• Specialist schools: catering exclusively to children with disabilities.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Study design           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child-reported voice that could be separately identified.</li> <li>• Primary qualitative studies – all designs accepted.</li> <li>• Mixed methods included only if the qualitative component provided sufficient depth.</li> <li>• Qualitative results presented as themes, quotes, statements, descriptions, observations, supporting or evidencing themes.</li> <li>• Questionnaires excluded.</li> </ul>                                                                  |
| Other criteria         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer-reviewed.</li> <li>• English language.</li> <li>• From 2013.</li> <li>• Accessible through the University of South Australia library.</li> <li>• Excluded theses, conference presentations, book chapters.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

over this time. The same study estimated a prevalence range of 0.24%–2.68% in European countries, and reported that the highest estimate globally came from an Australian study, where May, Brignell, and Williams (2020) estimated a prevalence of 4.36% among a cohort of 12–13-year-olds. This rapidly growing population has been shown to experience high levels of bullying and interpersonal abuse, and consequent mental health problems in adolescence and adulthood (Park et al. 2020).

For autistic students, difficulty in engaging optimally at school can be attributed to the school's failure to respond to their unique needs (Brede et al. 2017), and difficulties in adjusting to the school setting. The middle years (10–14 years) is a key, but under-recognised, period in young people's development, when they experience rapid physical and neurodevelopmental growth as they transition from primary to secondary school. Declines in subjective wellbeing at this time are often associated with increased odds of disengagement from education (Evans-Whipp et al. 2018). This in turn has implications for young people's longer-term educational outcomes and mental health.

Wellbeing is a multifaceted concept, and wellbeing in one domain influences wellbeing in other domains (Camfield, Streuli, and Woodhead 2010; Pollard and Lee 2003). Pollard and Lee (2003) identify wellbeing as including physical, social, cognitive and psychological domains, to which Minkkinen (2013) adds a material domain (for example, poverty). Young people's feelings and relationships are integral to their wellbeing. Positive and supportive relationships are generally seen as promoting wellbeing, while conflict and bullying have a negative impact (Boyden and Mann 2005). Keyes (2006) identifies two streams of research on subjective wellbeing, relating to happiness, and human potential. The 'hedonic tradition' of happiness is associated with emotional

wellbeing, while social and psychological wellbeing or functioning well in society is associated with 'the tradition of eudaimonia' (Keyes 2006, 5). The concept of 'relatedness' and closeness to others is a fundamental psychological need which is central to both eudaimonic and hedonic concepts of wellbeing.

There is now a substantial body of research on wellbeing among young people in their middle years, with a growing emphasis on foregrounding of young people's own perspectives. However, a significant gap remains regarding research that privileges the voices of marginalised young people to inform policy (Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist 2022; Redmond et al. 2016). In this context, there is a need to amplify the perspectives of autistic students on their wellbeing at school so that schools can better support them. Currently, no consolidated understanding exists to describe autistic students' own perspectives on their wellbeing experiences at school. This review was conducted to address this gap, with findings that would inform educators on supporting the mental health and wellbeing of autistic students who often experience high rates of interpersonal violence and low-quality relationships with peers and teachers (Huber and Carter 2019).

Our review, therefore, aimed to answer the review question: 'How do autistic students describe their wellbeing at school?' In this review, we show that autistic students identified relationships with peers and teachers, their own sense of identity, school environments and sense of safety as core elements in their wellbeing at school.

## 2. Method

We conducted a meta-synthesis as recommended by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI, Lockwood et al. 2024) to gain first-hand in-depth perspectives of the wellbeing of school students, aged 10–14 years. The review was guided by an a priori protocol to meta-aggregate and analyse qualitative evidence in line with the JBI guidelines. Consistent with the JBI approach, the authors aggregated the studies' findings into five inter-related categories. For each category, both challenges and coping mechanisms articulated by the students were reported. These categories were in turn aggregated into three overarching synthesis statements with the aim of providing high-level recommendations 'to guide practitioners and policy makers' (Lockwood et al. 2024).

Our methodology was informed by the ENTREQ (Enhancing Transparency in Reporting the Synthesis of Qualitative Research) statement (Tong et al. 2012), as well as the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement (Page et al. 2021). This meta-synthesis is registered with the Open Science Framework (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/G4NQ8>).

## 3. Search strategy and selection

After a pilot search, 11 electronic databases were searched by the university librarian on 17 May 2023 (see Supplementary Table S1 for search terms). Databases included Medline, ERIC, PsycInfo, Ovid Embase, Ovid Emcare, CINAHL Complete, A+ Education, Scopus, Web of Science, Sociological Abstracts and Applied Social Sciences Index. After removal of duplicates, titles and abstracts of 11,822 unique papers were screened by two researchers using selection criteria outlined in Table 1, after which 207 papers available to the authors

were fully read to assess their eligibility for inclusion (Figure 1). Conflicts regarding studies' eligibility were resolved with full consensus among all reviewers.

In the full-text review, 185 papers were excluded, mostly because they were not directly related to the research question (82), or did not study the target population (44) (see Figure 1). After full-text review, 22 papers were included in the final systematic analysis on the basis of the following criteria: they focused on students' own perceptions at primary or secondary school; student voice data could be extracted separately from those of other informants; the majority of students sampled were aged 10–14 years and diagnosed with autism; there was a significant qualitative component in the research; and they were published in a peer-reviewed journal between 2013 (the year changes to DSM-5 criteria for autism were implemented) and 2023.

#### 4. Process of critical appraisal

Two reviewers independently completed a critical appraisal process for the 22 included papers, with conflicts fully discussed until consensus was reached. Each study's methodological rigour was assessed using Daly et al.'s (2007) qualitative hierarchy of evidence-for-practice, according to which 17 were assessed as Level III (descriptive studies), four were assessed as level II (conceptual studies) and one as Level I (generalisable study). This quality ordering was broadly confirmed by the application of a modified Critical Appraisal Skills Programme tool, which provides an indicative framework for assessing study quality according to 10 criteria, each scored 3 to 1 (high, medium or low): study aims, method, research design, sampling, data collection, researcher's role, ethics, data analysis, presentation of findings and value of findings (CASP; 2018). An additional criterion was added: theoretical perspective identified (Letts et al. 2007). CASP total scores for the included studies ranged from 20 to 31, out of a potential total of 33. The mean CASP total score was 25.3. No studies were excluded based on quality appraisal, with lower scoring studies' data confirmed by higher scoring studies.

#### 5. Results

##### *Student and study characteristics*

Table 2 shows that 225 students' voices were represented in the total sample of all included studies (male = 201; female = 24). Most of the studies were conducted in the United Kingdom ( $n = 11$ ) and Australia ( $n = 6$ ). One study was conducted in France and Quebec, Canada; one in France; and one each in Chile, Ireland and Singapore. In the six studies that reported cultural/ethnic background, most participants were identified as white.

Fifteen of the 22 studies were conducted in high/secondary schools, three were conducted in primary schools, and four were conducted in both primary and secondary schools. All studies were conducted in mainstream schools, although two also included students enrolled in special schools in their sample, and four schools had specialist programmes or a specialist teacher. Studies did not indicate the level of support needs related to diagnosis. Data collection mostly involved interviews but also involved photos



**Table 2.** Study characteristics of included studies.

| Authors, date of publication, location                    | Aim of study                                                                                                         | Study design, data collection tools                                                                         | Sample size and description, as indicated by authors                                                                                                                 | Type of educational setting                                                                          | Quality (Daily et al. 2007, CASP, Letts et al. 2007) |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Aubineau and Blicharska (2020), France and Quebec, Canada | To understand how students cope with mainstream education                                                            | Parallel, mixed-method design<br>Semi-structured individual interviews, questionnaires, diaries             | N = 26 (24 male, 2 female), 12 - 16 years, French spoken at home                                                                                                     | Mainstream public and private secondary schools                                                      | II, 30                                               |
| Birkett, McGrath, and Tucker (2022), UK                   | To develop in-depth analytic insight regarding children's' post-transition sensory experiences                       | Ideographic and hermeneutic qualitative approach of school spaces.<br>Semi structured individual interviews | N = 4, 11-13 years, from 1 school                                                                                                                                    | Mainstream secondary school with a special school program                                            | III, 22                                              |
| Cook, Ogden, and Winstone (2016), UK                      | To explore experiences of learning, friendships and bullying of boys                                                 | Design not stated<br>Semi-structured, individual interviews                                                 | N = 11, males, 11 to 17 years (10 White, one Asian)                                                                                                                  | Mainstream and specialist secondary/high schools                                                     | II, 27                                               |
| Cunningham (2020), UK                                     | To gain an insight into autistic students' experience of primary school                                              | Phenomenological paradigm; group and individual semi-structured interviews                                  | N = 11 (8 male, 3 female), UK School Years 4-7, as stipulated by authors                                                                                             | Mainstream, three-form entry primary school with specialist resource provision for autistic students | III, 26                                              |
| Danker, Strnadová, and Cumming (2016), Australia          | To explore the conceptualisation, barriers and ways to enhance wellbeing of autistic students from their perspective | Participatory Research, Grounded theory.<br>Photovoice and individual interviews                            | N = 16 (15 male, 1 female), 13-17 years Level 1 severity Autism diagnosis (Requiring support)                                                                        | Mainstream high schools with support units                                                           | III, 29                                              |
| Dillon, Underwood, and Freemantle (2016), UK              | To examine student experience of peer and teacher relationships, school functioning and interpersonal ability        | Self-report questionnaire and semi-structured individual interviews                                         | N = 14 (11 male, 3 female), mean age 13.6<br>From one school                                                                                                         | Public mainstream secondary school with inclusion/special needs units                                | III, 24                                              |
| Hebron and Humphrey (2014), UK                            | To identify influences on and responses to mental health difficulties of adolescents                                 | Casual comparative framework<br>Semi-structured individual interviews                                       | N = 22 (19 male, 3 female)<br>Ages 11-17<br>No co-morbid difficulties<br>All participants' academic achievement levels in core subjects fell within the normal range | Mainstream secondary school                                                                          | III, 22                                              |

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

| Authors, date of publication, location       | Aim of study                                                                                          | Study design, data collection tools                                                                              | Sample size and description, as indicated by authors                                                                                                                                                             | Type of educational setting                                       | Quality (Daily et al. 2007, CASP, Lettis et al. 2007) |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Hill (2014), UK                              | To explore experiences of autistic young people                                                       | Interpretive phenomenology<br>Photo-elicitation; unstructured individual interviews                              | N = 6, UK Secondary School age<br>Two schools                                                                                                                                                                    | Mainstream secondary school                                       | III, 23                                               |
| Hummerstone and Parsons (2020), UK           | To investigate student perceptions of teaching and support                                            | Participatory approach<br>Photo-elicitation<br>Semi-structured interviews                                        | N = 12 (11 males, 1 female), all White British<br>Ages 11-15                                                                                                                                                     | Mainstream secondary schools                                      | III, 20                                               |
| Istuary and Wood (2020), Chile               | To explore student views on inclusion and participation at school.                                    | Exploratory case study<br>Focus group and online questionnaire                                                   | N = 5, all male, aged 10-19 years<br>Average intelligence<br>From one school                                                                                                                                     | Mainstream school with integration program and specialist teacher | III, 20                                               |
| Jacobs, Beamish, and McKay (2021), Australia | To investigate girls' experiences during the first two years of secondary school.                     | Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Method Design. Interpretive Phenomenology for qualitative methods.<br>Online survey | 5 girls, aged 12-14<br>Various schools                                                                                                                                                                           | Secondary public and private schools                              | III, 29                                               |
| Makin, Hill, and Pellicano (2017), UK        | To investigate children's transition from primary to secondary school                                 | Pre-and post-transition questionnaire                                                                            | N = 15 (13 male, 2 female), Year 6, White British                                                                                                                                                                | Mainstream and special schools                                    | II, 29                                                |
| McNerney, Hill, and Pellicano (2015), UK     | To examine young people's views on their impending transition to secondary school                     | Semi-structured interviews<br>Design not stated<br>Semi-structured individual interviews.                        | Considered cognitively able<br>N = 6 boys in Year 6, 3 White British, 3 Bengali<br>Receiving 15-25 hrs of support per week                                                                                       | Mainstream primary schools                                        | III, 27                                               |
| Mesa and Hamilton (2022), UK                 | To explore identity development from young people's experiences                                       | Longitudinal<br>Semi-structured, individual interviews (multiple points)                                         | N = 13, Aged 10-14, White British<br>Socio-economic status ranged from higher professional occupations to long-term unemployed.<br>2 participants moved to specialist education settings after school exclusions | Mainstream<br>Transitioning primary to secondary schools          | III, 25                                               |
| Neal and Frederickson (2016), UK             | To explore perspectives of children who had recently transitioned successfully into secondary schools | Design not stated<br>Semi-structured, individual interviews                                                      | N = 6 (5 male, 1 female), Year 7, White British.<br>Considered by teachers to have made successful transition. Average cognitive ability<br>From 5 schools                                                       | Mainstream secondary school                                       | I, 31                                                 |

(Continued)



Table 2. (Continued).

| Authors, date of publication, location       | Aim of study                                                                                              | Study design, data collection tools                                                                                | Sample size and description, as indicated by authors                                                                                                                                               | Type of educational setting                                                          | Quality (Daly et al. 2007, CASP, Letts et al. 2007) |
|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Pitt, Dixon, and Vialle (2021), Australia    | To examine students' experience of transition from mainstream primary to secondary schools                | Multiple case study<br>Mixed methods<br>Narrative enquiry<br>Semi-structured individual interviews<br>Observations | N = 10 (6 male, 4 female), 4 diagnosed with a moderate intellectual disability, 6 diagnosed with a mild intellectual disability<br>5 diagnosed with autism<br>Aged 11 - 12 years<br>From 4 schools | Mainstream<br>Primary school to high school transition<br>Catholic (Private) schools | II, 27                                              |
| Poon et al. (2014), Singapore                | To understand young people's perspectives on school                                                       | Phenomenology<br>Semi-structured individual interviews                                                             | N = 4 (3 males, 1 female), aged 12-17, identified as High Functioning<br>From 2 schools                                                                                                            | Mainstream secondary school                                                          | III, 26                                             |
| Richter et al. (2020), France                | To obtain understanding of students' perspectives on the primary-secondary transition                     | Semi-structured individual interviews at three different time points                                               | N = 16, male, 6 <sup>th</sup> grade (start of secondary school), had support from teaching assistants<br>From one school                                                                           | Mainstream secondary public and private schools                                      | III, 20                                             |
| Saggers (2015), Australia                    | To explore students' experiences of challenges and opportunities of schooling within an inclusive setting | Design not stated<br>2 semi-structured individual interviews                                                       | N = 9 (7 male, 2 female), Grades 8-12<br>From one school                                                                                                                                           | Mainstream public high school                                                        | III, 21                                             |
| Saggers et al. (2017), Australia             | To investigate students' experiences of bullying, and impact on wellbeing and schooling                   | Design not specified<br>Semi-structured individual interviews                                                      | N = 10 (9 males; 1 female), aged 11-16                                                                                                                                                             | Public, Catholic and home-schooling                                                  | III, 25                                             |
| Stack, Symonds, and Kinsella (2020), Ireland | To explore students' perspectives on transition from primary to secondary school                          | Semi-structured individual interviews, before and after the transition to secondary school                         | N = 6 (5 male, 1 female)<br>transferring from primary to secondary school<br>IQ scores in average range<br>Not receiving support<br>From 6 schools                                                 | Transferring from mainstream primary to secondary school                             | III, 27                                             |
| Zazzi and Faragher (2018), Australia         | To explore student interpretations of visual sensory input in the classroom                               | Interpretivist and hermeneutic theory<br>Photo elicitation, drawing and semi-structured individual interviews      | N = 3, Australian School Years 3-4<br>From 1 school                                                                                                                                                | Assumed mainstream primary school                                                    | III, 26                                             |

and activities in some cases. Some studies allowed an adult of choice to attend the interview if the student so desired.

Meta-aggregation of data was performed to determine content similarity, and findings were synthesised with the generation of a set of statements (Lockwood et al. 2024). Three synthesised findings were developed, with five categories supporting the synthesised findings (Supplementary Table 2 shows how categories were mapped onto findings; Supplementary Table 3 provides an example illustrating how the studies' findings informed the categories).

### ***Synthesised finding 1: autistic students' wellbeing is integrally connected to positive relationships at school***

#### ***Category 1.1: autistic students value positive relationships with peers and teachers as integral to their wellbeing***

Consistent with theories on wellbeing, autistic students valued friendships with peers, but also felt challenged in several respects. Some students grappled with the meaning of friendship. This was most obvious in the case of the two studies of French-speaking students, as the French language (unlike the English language) has a wide range of terms for different 'classes' of friendship (Aubineau and Blicharska 2020). Some students reported having no friends (Cook, Ogden, and Winstone 2016). Other students said they had 'The right amount of friends' (Cunningham 2020, 8), while others reported that they had a small friendship group (Dillon, Underwood, and Freemantle 2016; Makin, Hill, and Pellicano 2017). Support from friends, often one particular friend, was important for autistic students' wellbeing (Dillon, Underwood, and Freemantle 2016). Stack, Symonds, and Kinsella (2020) report that 'For some of the children who found school difficult, peers were a source of comfort in the yard or for helping understand the teachers' instructions' (p. 6). Some students talked about challenges, and success, in making new friends, including when they transitioned from primary to secondary school (Neal and Frederickson 2016; Siggers 2015). Danker, Strnadová, and Cumming (2016) report that non-academic clubs had a positive impact on some autistic students' wellbeing as they were able to make friends there. In Jacobs, Beamish, and McKay (2021, 5) autistic girls reported difficulties in making friends, but one also said 'If I didn't have friends, school wouldn't be enjoyable'.

Students expressed the desire to be understood and accepted by teachers, peers and the larger school community (Cunningham 2020). Birkett, McGrath, and Tucker (2022) articulated that marginalisation was an issue for autistic students. Many study participants recounted instances of being teased, excluded, or bullied due to their differences (Mesa and Hamilton 2022; Siggers et al. 2017). In Mesa and Hamilton (2022, 224), one student said: 'the autism people at [secondary school] are a bit targets to bullies'. In Hummerstone and Parsons (2020, 7) students mentioned the importance of caring and support from teaching staff. In Siggers et al. (2017) students mentioned the influence of teachers as a key factor in successful school inclusion. Communication with teachers and other adults was affected by trust, familiarity, being understood and feeling respected (Jacobs, Beamish, and McKay 2021). The autistic girls in this study found adults more difficult to communicate with than their peers: 'They might tell me off. I get very nervous' (p.10) and 'Sometimes they do not understand what I am trying to say... and it's frustrating' (p.11).

## ***Synthesised finding 2: autistic students' wellbeing at school centres around their self-identity***

### ***Category 2.1: sense of identity, agency and future becoming influences autistic students' wellbeing and belonging***

Autistic students expressed diverse views on their identity. Some did not reveal their diagnosis to others. One student, referring to transition to secondary school, said 'All you have to do is act normal' (Makin, Hill, and Pellicano 2017, 8). In the same study, students reported feeling more aware of their differences, 'referring to themselves as "weird" or a "nerd" ...' (p. 9) and finding ways to fit in, for example, by 'being funny' (p. 9).

Others embraced their autism diagnosis as a way of understanding themselves better and finding a sense of belonging within the autistic community: 'I'd rather be different and have a reason for it, than not be different ... I like being labelled autistic, I don't know why ... Because it's the reason why I am who I am' (Mesa and Hamilton 2022, 222). One student said that he viewed his autism as 'a very special thing to have' (Cunningham 2020, 8). Another student stated: 'I think, [I'm] special, I am different from others ... and this marks me out of the crowd. Just like Albert Einstein ...' (Poon et al. 2014, 1075). Students also referred to their sense of agency in the context of being different. One autistic girl stated, 'you really need to think of what is good for you and what is not ... experiment to find out what is the best thing for you' (Jacobs, Beamish, and McKay 2021, 6). Another said, 'If you want to do something, go for it, even if it's cringe or wrong, you don't need their approval ... just remember that you're not alone and you'll be able to live through this, no matter if you feel and express yourself differently' (p.6).

Students' sense of identity was closely connected to the type of support they valued from teachers. They appreciated flexible teachers who were aware of their individual needs, facilitated respectful communication and implemented an inclusive curriculum (Jacobs, Beamish, and McKay 2021). However, some students did not want support to protect them from other students: 'I am not settling in the best. I don't get help [from a teaching assistant] with my work but I don't want it, that's why. It gives people fuel and they use it and tease me. The other children still tease me for it and so I refuse them to help me write' (Makin, Hill, and Pellicano 2017, 8). Cunningham (2020) reported participants sharing their perspectives on the support they needed (predictability, routine, safe space, regular breaks, support with writing and flexibility with homework stipulations) but often only accepted support if it was hidden from their peers.

Several studies touched on students' aspirations, career plans and ambitions, what Danker, Strnadová, and Cumming (2016, 135) describe as their well-becoming. However, aspirations also acted as a coping mechanism for autistic students' present lives. One autistic girl said she needed to go to school despite her negative experiences there: 'I need to go to have a future' (Jacobs, Beamish, and McKay 2021, 5). Students also articulated their aspirations for further study and to attend university (Aubineau and Blicharska 2020). In this context, several students discussed how academic requirements impacted their wellbeing (Aubineau and Blicharska 2020; Cunningham 2020; Jacobs, Beamish, and McKay 2021; McNerney,

Hill, and Pellicano 2015). Some students reported having strong interests and being passionate about some subjects (Aubineau and Blicharska 2020). The students in McNerney, Hill, and Pellicano (2015, 14) 'demonstrated an acute awareness of the importance of learning', coupled with anxiety about not achieving academically. In Jacobs, Beamish, and McKay (2021) female students discussed getting anxious about completing their classroom work or assignments on time, which further impacted their ability to concentrate and perform.

### *Synthesised finding 3: experiencing safe school environments impacts autistic students' wellbeing at school*

#### *Category 3.1: emotional wellbeing and sense of safety is core to school students' overall wellbeing*

Emotional wellbeing, including the importance of having fun and being happy, is a prominent theme in the studies. One student talked about his photograph of a dog and wanted to be 'that happy' (like the dog) at school and that it would help him as he 'can be educated more' (Danker, Strnadová, and Cumming 2016, 134). However, some students reported feeling anxious about going to school (Danker, Strnadová, and Cumming 2016; Jacobs, Beamish, and McKay 2021). This was associated with a sense of uncertainty, a fear of failure and stress regarding excessive workloads. One student said, 'I don't know if I am going to have a panic attack or if someone might tease me. I don't know what is going to happen that day' (Jacobs, Beamish, and McKay 2021, 9).

Students supported their own wellbeing and sense of safety with coping strategies that included having predictability and routine, daily and weekly timetables, clear, concise instructions to follow, and access to a safe space that 'helped them manage their feelings of anxiety' (Cunningham 2020, 8). Students also reported supporting their own wellbeing by confiding in someone, calming down through the use of time-out cards and listening to music (Danker, Strnadová, and Cumming 2016). In one study from Chile, students had to learn to cope with risks associated with earthquakes; they expressed anxiety about these unpredictable events and emphasised the importance of support from teachers (Istuanay and Wood 2020).

Some students reported preferring to do homework at school where they could concentrate better (Cunningham 2020). Others articulated a preference for keeping home and school life separate – therefore also preferring to do homework at school (Mesa and Hamilton 2022). Flexible teaching and classroom strategies to facilitate learning were favourably mentioned by autistic students, including complementing verbal explanations with written formats, presenting work in smaller units, providing multiple means of sensory information, and providing opportunities to complete tests in different formats (Jacobs, Beamish, and McKay 2021). Students also appreciated parental support, for example, supporting them in not completing homework or not going to school if they were stressed or tired (Aubineau and Blicharska 2020; Jacobs, Beamish, and McKay 2021).

Where students experienced low wellbeing, they reported a range of consequences, including stress, mistrust, low self-esteem, depression and suicidal thoughts, with the result that one student 'swallowed magnets which led to them being in hospital for two weeks' (Cook, Ogden, and Winstone 2016, 264). Another student in the same study reported that a 'peer used to tell him that he should die, but that since then most of his

peers had matured' (p. 264). For some students, experience of poor wellbeing was also associated with suspension or exclusion from school (Mesa and Hamilton 2022). Some students did not want to go to school: 'I don't know what things I like about primary school. I hate school', as well as 'I don't want to go back to [secondary] school tomorrow. I am not supposed to be there. It's a bad school for me' (Makin, Hill, and Pellicano 2017, 8).

Hebron and Humphrey (2014) report that autistic students who did not feel their needs were being met would withdraw socially and academically from classroom and classmates, particularly during unstructured periods. This was linked to unease about misinterpreting social contexts and situations, which sometimes had negative consequences. One participant reported: 'I want to help people, but when I help them, it always ends up in fights' (Hebron and Humphrey 2014, 28).

### *Category 3.2 school students report the significant impact of sensory and physical school environments on their wellbeing at school*

In several studies, students described the impact of sensory environments on their sense of wellbeing (Aubineau and Blicharska 2020; Birkett, McGrath, and Tucker 2022; Cunningham 2020; Danker, Strnadová, and Cumming 2016). One student described shared indoor areas such as corridors and lunch halls: 'the hallways are the busiest, when everyone moves from one class to another ... my own space is invaded and I have like, this much left (... makes a gesture where he pinches his thumb and forefinger together)' (p.4). Another student talked about getting squashed and needing to push his way through. The same student also talked about the effect of inside noise: 'It causes pain. It really hurts my ears and then I just shout and get angry. I really don't like it ...' (Birkett, McGrath, and Tucker 2022, 5).

Autistic students often expressed concern about the structural environments at school. In one study, drawings and interview data illustrated students' feelings of confusion, stress, anxiety, nausea, unsettledness, fear, uneasiness, sadness and anger associated with their physical environment, such as the colour palette, furniture arrangements and crowding of decorations (Zazzi and Faragher 2018). One student talked about his perception of space, for example, narrow hallways where a lot of students gather, as being 'finite' (Birkett, McGrath, and Tucker 2022, 4). One student said regarding hallways: 'I feel really, really, really tiny. Cos it's very, very, very, very, very big. Yeah. Yeah. I feel like a tiny man. A tiny man. ...' (Hill 2014, 83).

Students used a range of strategies to avoid challenging physical environments, including avoiding busy spaces and finding quiet spots: 'This is the reception area. I go through in the morning and when I finish school. Cos in other entrances there's quite a lot of people. Sometimes they can be rough and you don't know what other students are like ... or what they are going to do' (Hill 2014, 84). Students also spoke about the need for a support base as a 'calm and relaxing' environment at school where they could spend breaks (Hill 2014), and about wanting to avoid the noise and general clutter of the classroom (Danker, Strnadová, and Cumming 2016; Istuany and Wood 2020).

### *Category 3.3: navigating transitions is an important challenge for autistic students*

Several studies focused on students' experiences of the transition from primary to secondary school. Students expressed anxiety about both transitions from primary to secondary school, and daily transitions between classrooms. Neal and Frederickson

(2016), focussing on the transition experience between primary and high school, reported that all participants in their study experienced anxiety before the transition. Makin, Hill, and Pellicano (2017) reported negative experiences among most students they interviewed on their transitions to high school. On the other hand, Stack, Symonds, and Kinsella (2020) reported mostly positive views: 'It's fun, it's better than what I expected it to be' (p. 6). Similarly, Richter et al. (2020) reported mostly positive transition experiences, where students saw transition as an opportunity to make a fresh start.

When making their transitions, students highlighted anticipated changes, including increased size of the secondary schools, discipline-focused school systems, multiple teachers and classrooms and an increasingly demanding curriculum (Neal and Frederickson 2016). Transition programmes to help navigate the changes and new school environments sometimes helped: 'Transition has helped by just showing me where everything is ...' (Pitt, Dixon, and Vialle 2021, 787) and 'First time I went I was worried I was going to get lost but now I'm used to it. I feel good, better than I used to' (787).

## 6. Discussion and implications for practice

This is the first meta-synthesis to consider the perspectives of autistic students regarding their wellbeing at school. From the 22 included studies with the voices of 225 autistic students, three synthesised findings were identified, relating to relationships, sense of identity and safety. The importance of relationships expressed by autistic students mirrors the prominence given to relationships in the broader wellbeing literature (Boyden and Mann 2005; Keyes 2006; Minkkinen 2013). This is congruent with the qualitative review undertaken by Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist (2022), which focused on autism interventions in inclusive education from multiple stakeholder perspectives ( $n = 108$  studies, with 12 studies from autistic student voice, aged 5–19 years). This finding underlines the need for schools to develop more welcoming approaches and greater understanding among educators to promote autistic students' social and emotional wellbeing, not least as they transition from primary to secondary school (Roberts and Simpson 2016; Roberts and Webster 2020).

Autistic students' perspectives on their self-identity are also significant in the context of an emerging body of research linking disabled people's self-identity with their wellbeing (Chalk, Barlett, and Barlett 2020). This finding also aligns with the neuro-affirmative paradigm (Izuno-Garcia, McNeel, and Fein 2023, 54) where autism is celebrated as an integral part of autistic people's identity. Finally, the physical and sensory school environment was also highlighted as a key determinant of autistic students' wellbeing at school. Autistic students find the chaos of crowded spaces difficult, and they try to cope by seeking out quiet and orderly spaces. Research has previously highlighted this as an issue for autistic students, but also one where more research is needed (Petersson-Bloom and Holmqvist 2022; Roberts and Simpson 2016).

### 6.1. Implications for practice

The findings of this review reinforce the need for schools to do more to support the wellbeing of autistic students, and stand on the shoulders of the many significant initiatives already generated at teacher, school and system levels (see, for example, the

National Guideline for Supporting the Learning, Participation, and Wellbeing of Autistic Children and their Families in Australia; Trembath et al. 2022). Prioritising students' own ideas about wellbeing suggests the development of individualised rights-based approaches to accommodate the needs of autistic students in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006). Strong school leadership can help foster inclusive environments, improve school practices and reinforce positive attitudes among students and staff (Roberts and Webster 2020). Additional support can facilitate smooth transitions from primary to secondary school (De Oliveira Borba et al. 2020), especially if students are consulted on their preferences for the types of support offered.

From this review, it is evident that autistic students' wellbeing at school requires educators to understand how autistic students experience wellbeing, and how their concerns and aspirations can be better addressed. In offering support, educators need to respect students' identity preferences. Support for relationship building among autistic students and their peers needs to operate in the classroom, on the playground, during breaks, during transitions between classes and transitions between schools.

## 7. Limitations

This meta-synthesis focused on primary research published in English, involving a rigorous process of critical appraisal. Most of the high-quality studies critically appraised in this review were conducted in English-speaking, westernised countries, and mostly with male students in mainstream schools. Future studies need to focus on a broader variety of boys and girls in diverse population groups attending special schools and home schooling as well as mainstream schools. Furthermore, about half of the studies had limited detail regarding demographic information, which may limit generalisation from these studies. Lastly, none of the studies explicitly stated the researchers' relationship with participants; this critical appraisal item should be reported in future qualitative studies.

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