Autism Research

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"Being Integrated Does Not Mean Being Included": What Factors Contribute to School Exclusion for Autistic Children?

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ABSTRACT

Autistic students face a heightened risk of exclusion from school and related activities, yet the factors contributing to this issue remain poorly understood. To address this gap, the current study took place in Ontario, Canada's largest province, where diverse populations and varied inclusive education policies create unique challenges. The study had two primary objectives: (1) to examine the relationship between parent satisfaction with the individual education plan (IEP) process and school exclusion, and (2) to identify key factors parents perceive as predictors of school exclusion in their autistic children. A total of 412 caregivers from Ontario completed an online survey, available in English and French, between April and July 2018. Quantitative analysis revealed that greater satisfaction with the IEP process was associated with a lower likelihood of school exclusion ($b = -0.297$, OR = 0.743, $p < 0.001$). Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses identified two primary contributors to exclusion: bullying by peers and inadequate training and support for school staff. These findings highlight the need for improved supports in educational settings, including comprehensive anti-bullying initiatives, stronger collaboration with parents in the development of IEPs, greater accountability in ensuring that IEPs are properly implemented, a more inclusive approach to meeting student needs, and increased funding for support staff. Addressing these areas could help reduce the risk of exclusion and foster a more equitable learning environment for autistic students.

1 | Introduction

Access to education is a fundamental human right that enables children to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to pursue their goals, reach their potential, and contribute to society. School participation also facilitates social connections, encourages peer learning, enhances overall well-being, fosters a sense of belonging, and improves quality of life (Allison et al. 2019; Danker et al. 2019; Tobin et al. 2014). However, many children, especially those with disabilities, are denied this right, limiting their opportunities for growth and development (Brede et al. 2017; Li et al. 2024). Autistic students are particularly vulnerable due to inadequate support, a lack of understanding, insufficient accommodations, sensory hypersensitivities, and social challenges, all of which hinder their full participation in educational settings (Ghanouni et al. 2019; Hodges et al. 2020; Ólafsdóttir et al. 2024).

Indeed, previous research has shown that autistic students are at a greater risk of exclusion from school and school-based activities

(Nordin et al. 2024). A study by Adams (2022) found that, on average, autistic students in Australia miss 1 day every 2 months due to school exclusion. This includes instances when children are informally excluded, either by being sent home because of their behavior or by being asked to stay away because the school is unable to meet their needs or ensure their safety. Other research by Truman et al. (2024) observed that 50% of autistic children in the United Kingdom were informally excluded from school. Estimates of school exclusion rates in Canada are scarce, despite multiple attempts from news and political organizations to access this data in Ontario, where more than half of school exclusions are reported to be among students receiving some form of special education (Cross 2023; Syed 2024). However, a 2025 report by the Ontario Autism Coalition, a grassroots political advocacy organization, found that 6% of the 429 families surveyed reported their autistic children were entirely excluded from school, while 37% reported partial exclusion (i.e., students excluded from various elements of the educational experience, including only being able to attend school partial school days) (Ontario Autism Coalition 2025). To provide a comparison, data from the Ontario Ministry of Education for the 2021–2022 school year shows that approximately 1.57% of the general student population received at least one full-day suspension during the year (Ministry of Education 2022).

Given the negative impact of school exclusion on a child's academic success and social–emotional well-being, research has sought to identify risk factors for autistic students. One focus of this research has been the school environment, which is typically designed to meet the needs of non-autistic children, creating a mismatch with the needs of autistic students. A lack of accommodations and adaptations in the school environment to address the sensory and social challenges commonly experienced by autistic students has been identified in the literature (Danker et al. 2019; Totsika et al. 2020). Other research has highlighted barriers related to navigating complex bureaucratic systems in order to obtain supports for their children (Brede et al. 2017; Gray et al. 2023), poor parent–teacher relationships (Martin-Denham 2022; Sproston et al. 2017), limited training and understanding of autistic students' needs and preferences (Truman et al. 2024), negative attitudes toward neurodiversity (Gray et al. 2023; Sproston et al. 2017), and problematic responses to students' behavior (e.g., use of physical restraints) (Brede et al. 2017). More recently, research has highlighted the growing prevalence of bullying, which contributes to a hostile and unsafe environment for autistic students (Nordin et al. 2024; Sproston et al. 2017).

Another line of research has explored the relationship between child and family characteristics as a risk factor for school exclusion in autistic students. Findings have revealed higher rates of school exclusion among children from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds (Totsika et al. 2024), those from single-parent households (Totsika et al. 2020), and children with parents who are either unemployed or highly educated (Totsika et al. 2020). On the other hand, child-specific factors have also been identified in the literature; for example, a study by Totsika et al. (2024) found that hyperactivity was associated with increased school absences due to school exclusion. Taken together, this research has advanced our understanding of the various factors—spanning the school environment, family factors, and child-specific characteristics—that contribute to school exclusion, while also revealing gaps in the existing knowledge that need further exploration.

One area that has yet to be explored, to the best of our knowledge, is the potential link between parent satisfaction with the individual education plan (IEP) process and school exclusion. In Ontario's special education system, an IEP aims to identify a student's unique learning needs, set clear goals, outline required supports and services, and promote collaboration among educators, parents, and other professionals to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities (Government of Ontario 2024). A positive or negative experience with IEP development could influence how effectively schools accommodate students' needs, potentially reducing or preventing exclusion. This may be plausible given previous research demonstrating the importance of school–parent relationships in improving the quality of education for autistic students (Totsika et al. 2024). Furthermore, studies have shown that strained school–parent interactions, often rooted in dissatisfaction with support plans like IEPs, are associated with higher rates of exclusion, particularly for autistic students (Brede et al. 2017; Martin-Denham 2022; Sproston et al. 2017). When families feel their input is undervalued or their child's needs are unmet, trust in the educational system erodes, leading to adversarial dynamics that increase the risk of exclusionary practices (Cleary et al. 2024). These findings suggest that parent perceptions of the IEP process may be a critical, yet underexamined, factor influencing school exclusion for autistic students. To address this gap, the current study sought to examine how satisfaction with the IEP process might serve as a predictor of school exclusion.

School absence is a complex and multifaceted issue, with various types of nonattendance posing distinct challenges for research and intervention. Over time, the definition of school exclusion has evolved, further complicating the understanding of this phenomenon (Heyne et al. 2020; Sasso and Sansour 2024). Researchers have categorized school nonattendance into *non-problematic* (e.g., missing school for a medical appointment) and *problematic* (Heyne et al. 2019). Heyne et al. (2019) identified four distinct types of *problematic* nonattendance: *school refusal* refers to nonattendance due to emotional distress related to attending school, with the parent's knowledge and despite their efforts to ensure attendance; *school withdrawal* occurs when the parent is aware but either keeps the child home or fails to enforce attendance; *truancy* is absence without permission, typically involving the child's efforts to conceal the absence from the parents; and *school exclusion* refers to nonattendance initiated by the school, whether due to an inability to accommodate the child's needs or discouraging attendance.

The current study focuses on school exclusion, a topic that has more recently gained attention, yet is still poorly understood despite its significant impact on children and their families. Further, the bulk of research thus far has been conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom, with limited focus given to how school exclusion affects students in other regions, such as Canada. Our study focuses on Ontario, Canada's largest province, in which a diverse population and varied inclusive education policies present distinct challenges, underscoring the need for targeted research to develop effective solutions that improve

the inclusion and academic success of autistic students. The goal of this study is twofold: (1) to examine the relationship between parent satisfaction with the IEP process and school exclusion, and (2) to explore which factors parents perceive as most important in predicting school exclusion in their autistic children.

2 | Methods

2.1 | Participants

A total of 412 caregivers from Ontario participated in an online survey, offered in both English and French from April 2018 to July 2018. Participants were primarily recruited through Autism Ontario, which maintains a database of families with autistic children. To be eligible, parents needed to have a child aged 18 or younger with an autism diagnosis. The majority of respondents were mothers (92%). The average family income was $87,000, which was below the provincial average of $97,856 (2016 Ontario Census). Parents reported on children aged 1–18 years ($M = 9.35$; SD = 3.77). Demographic details for parents and their children are summarized in Table 1. To protect the confidentiality of all research participants, pseudonyms were used when presenting the study's findings.

2.2 | Measures

The survey was designed collaboratively by the research team, community partners from Autism Ontario, and experts in related fields (see Acknowledgments). It underwent pilot testing with members of the autism community, including parent caregivers representing diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, gender, geographic, and neurodivergent (autistic) backgrounds. During this phase, participants provided feedback on the survey's content, clarity, comprehensiveness, accessibility, and language. After incorporating their suggestions and making revisions, a final group of parents and researchers reviewed the online version in Qualtrics to confirm its usability and logical structure.

The survey gathered feedback from primary caregivers in Ontario to assess the impact of autism policies and services, focusing on barriers and facilitators in access, with the goal of providing evidence-based policy recommendations to better support families. The survey covered several key areas, including: (1) child health, (2) child education, (3) autism services and supports, and (4) caregiver well-being. The primary focus of the current study was on the section related to the child's education. Demographic data and responses to questions about school exclusion and parent satisfaction with the process of developing their child's IEP were analyzed using the measures outlined below.

2.3 | Independent Variables

2.3.1 | Sociodemographic Survey

Participants were asked to provide information about their sociodemographic background, including details about themselves (e.g., age, gender, and education level), their child (e.g.,

TABLE 1 | Family demographics.

Demographic Information	Frequency (%) ($N = 412$)
Caregiver gender	
Male	33 (8.0)
Female	379 (92.0)
Family and parenting situation	
Married	308 (74.8)
Common Law	38 (9.2)
Separated	19 (4.6)
Divorced	21 (5.1)
Widowed	2 (0.5)
Single	24 (5.8)
Do you identify as part of a racialized group?	
Yes	61 (14.8)
No	351 (85.2)
Highest level of education	
High school diploma or equivalent	25 (6.1)
Some college or university	36 (8.7)
College, CEGEP, or other nonuniversity certificate or diploma	142 (34.5)
Associate degree	1 (0.2)
University undergraduate degree	127 (30.8)
University graduate degree	43 (10.4)
Professional degree	11 (2.7)
Doctoral degree	9 (2.2)
Child's gender	
Female	72 (17.5)
Male	340 (82.5)
Perceived level of child support needs	
Requires very substantial support	47 (11.4)
Requires substantial support	66 (16.0)
Requires support	47 (11.4)
Unsure	235 (57.0)
Type of school setting	
Public school	239 (58.0)
Catholic school	109 (26.5)
Private school	18 (4.4)
Preschool	14 (3.4)

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Demographic Information	Frequency (%) ($N = 412$)
Alternative school	7 (1.7)
Other	25 (6.1)
Educational placement	
A full-time special education class for the entire school day.	73 (17.7)
A regular class with indirect support where the student is placed in a regular class for the entire day, and the teacher receives specialized consultative services.	96 (23.3)
A regular class with resource assistance where the student is placed in a regular class for most or all of the day and receives specialized instruction, individually or in a small group, within the regular classroom from a qualified special education teacher and/or educational assistant.	124 (30.1)
A regular class with withdrawal assistance where the student is placed in a regular class and receives instruction outside the classroom, for less than 50% of the school day, from a qualified special education teacher and/or educational assistant.	37 (9.0)
A special education class with partial integration where the student is placed in a special education class for at least 50% of the school day, but is integrated with a regular class for at least one instructional period daily.	37 (9.0)
Other	44 (10.7)

age, gender, and support needs), and their family (e.g., income and marital status).

2.3.2 | Co-Occurring Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD was included as a covariate in the analysis since co-occurring conditions like ADHD are commonly diagnosed in autistic individuals (Matson and Shoemaker 2009). Parents were asked a yes/no question about whether their child had been diagnosed with ADHD.

2.3.3 | Satisfaction With IEP Process

Parent satisfaction with the IEP process was measured using a Likert scale, where parents were asked, "How satisfied are you with the process of developing an IEP for your child?" Responses ranged from 1 (*very dissatisfied*) to 5 (*very satisfied*).

2.4 | Dependent Variable

2.4.1 | School Exclusion

The main outcome variable, school exclusion, was a dichotomous variable indicating whether the child had experienced school exclusion in the past 12 months. Exclusion was defined as a "yes" response to any of the following: (1) being sent home due to the school's inability to manage behavior or safety issues, (2) exclusion from field trips or other school activities, (3) being picked up early due to challenging behaviors or inadequate resources, (4) suspension or expulsion related to the child's disability, or (5) being picked up due to a lack of toilet training.

2.5 | Open-Ended Questions

The three open-ended questions that were qualitatively analyzed were as follows:

1. How satisfied are you that your child is receiving a meaningful education that matches their learning needs?
2. How satisfied are you that your child is receiving an education in a safe and supportive environment?
3. Have you experienced any frustrations or challenges with respect to your child(ren)'s treatment within the education system?

2.6 | Procedure

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the institution in Ontario, Canada. Parents who met the inclusion criteria provided their consent and proceeded to complete the main survey questions. To improve accessibility and accommodate parents, the survey was kept brief, taking approximately 15–30 min to complete. Participants were offered the chance to enter a draw for a grand prize of $500 or three consolation prizes of $100 each.

2.7 | Analytic Plan

2.7.1 | Quantitative Analysis

To examine factors predicting school exclusion, descriptive and preliminary analyses were conducted prior to performing a multivariate binary logistic regression using the enter method (two-tailed, $\alpha = 0.05$). Descriptive statistics were reported as means and standard deviations (SDs) for continuous variables, while categorical variables, including marital and minority status, were summarized using frequencies and percentages. Group differences were assessed using chi-square tests or Fisher's exact tests for categorical variables and independent-samples *t*-tests or Mann–Whitney *U*-tests for continuous variables. Collinearity among independent variables was assessed using variance inflation factors (VIFs) and tolerance values, confirming no multicollinearity concerns. Outliers and influential cases were examined using Cook's distance and leverage statistics. Sample size adequacy was verified, adhering to the guideline of at least

TABLE 2 | Scale descriptive statistics.

Survey item	Frequency (%)	*M* (SD)	Observed range	Theoretical range
School exclusion				
Yes	177 (42.3)			
No	235 (57.0)			
Individual education plan satisfaction				
Does not apply to me	13 (3.2)			
Very dissatisfied	93 (22.6)			
Somewhat dissatisfied	57 (13.8)			
Neutral	76 (18.4)			
Somewhat satisfied	101 (24.5)			
Very satisfied	72 (17.5)			
Overall satisfaction score		2.91 (1.51)	0–5	0–5

TABLE 3 | Satisfaction with the IEP process predicting school exclusion.

				95% CI for OR	
Predictor variables	***B***	**Sig.**	**OR**	**Lower**	**Upper**
Population size	−0.099	0.297	0.906	0.752	1.091
Household income	0.000	0.122	1.000	1.000	1.000
Parent education	−0.090	0.099	0.914	0.821	1.017
Visible minority	−0.336	0.285	0.714	0.386	1.323
Marital status	−0.060	0.455	0.942	0.804	1.103
Comorbid ADHD	0.449	0.041*	1.567	1.018	2.410
IEP scale	−0.297	< 0.001**	0.743	0.647	0.853

*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.01$.

10 events per predictor variable. Adjusted odds ratios (ORs) with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated for each predictor. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 29.

2.7.2 | Qualitative Analysis

Open-ended responses from the survey related to experiences of school exclusion were organized in an Excel spreadsheet (Version 16.73, Microsoft Inc.). Thematic analysis, following Clarke and Braun's (2013) approach, was applied to analyze the three open-ended survey questions. The second author, a neurotypical researcher with over 10 years of experience in autism and developmental disabilities research, reviewed the entire set of open-ended responses to become familiar with the data and generate a list of potential codes. These codes were identified both semantically, by summarizing participants' overall responses, and latently, by interpreting the underlying meaning of those responses. The generated codes were discussed in meetings with the research team, including the other authors. Through an iterative process, the codes were refined, revised, and grouped together into broader themes and subthemes. Codes that were found to be similar or redundant were combined. The authors further refined the themes through discussion, identifying patterns across the data. Related themes and subthemes were merged, and those not deemed meaningful or relevant to the research question were excluded.

3 | Results

3.1 | Quantitative

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the main predictor variable, satisfaction with the IEP process, and the dependent variable, school exclusion. Based on parent reports, 42.3% of children had experienced school exclusion. Table 3 reports the results of the binary logistic regression model predicting school exclusion. Children with comorbid ADHD were 1.57 times more likely to be excluded from school than those without ($b = 0.449$, OR = 1.567, $p = 0.041$). For the main predictor variable, satisfaction with the IEP process, with each one-unit increase in the IEP scale (indicating greater parent

satisfaction), children were less likely to be excluded from school ($b = -0.297$, OR = 0.743, $p < 0.001$). Population size, household income, parent education, visible minority status, and marital status were not significant predictors of school exclusion.

3.2 | Qualitative

Parents identified two main factors contributing to school exclusion for autistic students: bullying by peers and inadequate training and support from school staff. Although some of these experiences reflect elements of social exclusion, the severity and frequency of bullying, due to a lack of designated safe spaces and limited supervision during unstructured times (e.g., recess), often resulted in school exclusion. Additionally, misinterpretation of autistic behaviors such as stimming, combined with insufficient staff training in de-escalation and failure to implement IEP accommodations, often escalates situations, further contributing to school exclusion.

3.3 | Bullying

The absence of adequate supervision and designated safe spaces during unstructured times, such as lunch and recess, can significantly increase the risk of bullying and harassment. Parents spoke about having designated areas that can help autistic students manage social interactions and sensory challenges more effectively and allow them to feel safe and supported in their environment. This is exemplified by one parent's account:

> My child is bullied daily, she is left out and pushed away by her peers. She has been tied up, punched, kicked, pushed to the ground, verbally assaulted at school. Nothing has been done! She used to go to the library at recess as a safe space but that was taken away due to cutbacks. She has asked me repeatedly to homeschool her because she can't handle the bullies.
>
> (Isla, mother of a 14-year-old girl)

Bullying and exclusion can occur when teachers and students do not understand the needs of autistic individuals, such as the need for stimming, fidgeting, breaks, and other coping mechanisms. This lack of knowledge and awareness can lead to misinterpreting their behaviors, and can result in the student feeling isolated, excluded, and insufficiently supported by their teachers and peers. For example, one parent shared:

> He was in a classroom where the teacher was difficult to work with and didn't seem to understand what autism was. My son was struggling in class with some classmates and I was told that my son was "deliberately antagonizing" the children by tapping his pencil on his desk. I explained that although I can understand it can be irritating for others, he does this as a means to focus. His teacher disagreed and didn't seem to understand the need for fidgeting. His classmates were throwing my son's shoes, mitts, lunch bag down the hall every day and he was constantly 10-15 m late after school. I was told by his teacher that my son was not organized and it happens by accident.
>
> (Mei, mother of a 13-year-old boy)

Families highlighted the failure of schools to implement safeguards, revealing systemic issues in school bullying protocols. This indicates a significant failure in ensuring the student's safety and well-being, as the lack of action not only heightens the risk of further incidents, but also shows a disregard for the victim's need for protection and a secure learning environment. The following statements illustrate this:

> Anti-bully[ing] is just a nice campaign. My son was often bullied, in a way that children shouldn't know about. Just words and no punishment from the school, an open invitation to beat him again.
>
> (Kristen, mother of a 10-year-old boy)

> Our son was assaulted in his first year of high school on school property. Student who assaulted him was placed in the same class as him in the next semester. No safeguards in place or notification provided to us or his teacher. Only other school alternatives were to home school. We did this for one semester with some success but online learning was not a flexible enough environment to adequately accommodate his needs. Our son also suffered from social isolation and lack of peer connections in home school environment.
>
> (Stephanie, mother of a 17-year-old boy)

One of the most critical factors parents cited as contributing to bullying was the culture of the school and attitudes of its educators and staff. This influence trickles down to students, shaping their perceptions of social norms, inclusion, and empathy. For instance, one parent shared this concern by saying,

> Being integrated does not mean being included. The culture of the school does not embrace students whose learning is very different. Our son is ignored often by other students.
>
> (Fatima, mother of a 14-year-old boy)

4 | Inadequate Training and Support

Parents in the study reported receiving calls from the school to pick up their children for various challenging behaviors, ranging from high-risk behaviors (resulting in potential injury to self, others, or property) to emotional distress. Whether the

issue was significant or minor, it often led to extreme measures being taken, such as involving the police or requiring parents to leave work and pick up their child immediately. This often resulted in a loss of income and additional stress for parents. This issue was particularly frustrating for parents when there was already a plan in place as outlined in the IEP to prevent such behaviors, such as scheduled sensory breaks that were not provided, leading to an escalation in the child's behavior. One parent explains:

> For 5 months he was required to be at home because they had no one to support him. He is high functioning and doesn't even necessarily have "behaviours." The issue was they were not following his IEP, for example not getting sensory breaks, and then due to a lack of providing him with the appropriate accommodations he would have behaviours and then was often punished for reacting. He gets overstimulated and becomes silly or unable to manage his reactions and then is punished through detentions, missing out on recess, getting a tick on the board for bad behaviour. This makes him more upset. Had he got his scheduled breaks there would have been no bad behaviour. So he was kept home because they didn't have the staff to ensure he got his sensory breaks or the help support he needed.
>
> (Emily, mother of an 18-year-old boy)

Parents often attributed the need to pick up their children from school to the staff's lack of training and inability to recognize signs of distress and take preventive measures to avoid these situations from occurring in the first place. As one parent noted, "They see the yelling and crying, but not the trigger." Importantly, numerous parents reported having to withdraw their children from school or resort to homeschooling due to concerns about their child's safety and well-being. Particularly, parents perceived a lack of knowledge and training in de-escalation strategies and an overreliance on restraints and seclusion, which are not only harmful but also traumatizing. Three parents described this by sharing,

> When my kids were younger, both were excluded as "safety risks," subject to frequent restraints, constantly sent home by 10 in the morning, denied transportation services, excluded from events and trips, subject to poorly trained, angry staff with no understanding of autism or behavior management.
>
> (Keisha, mother of a 17-year-old boy)

> Staff are not trained enough in behavior support and as a result tools like a seclusion room are frequently used.
>
> (Priya, mother of an 11-year-old boy)

> The majority of the people who interact with my son are safe. About half of them are informed and supportive. However, my son was assaulted by a supply teacher who was uninformed of my son's needs and couldn't handle his outbursts.
>
> (Kaya, mother of a 6-year-old boy)

Not only were children being excluded because of their challenging behaviors, but they were also denied positive and enriching opportunities to participate in field trips and events due to the lack of available support staff. For example, two parents conveyed this concern by commenting:

> He was not allowed to attend two field trips and could not stay at school with only one adult to supervise. I had to keep him home on those days.
>
> (Dina, mother of a 9-year-old boy)

> Unless I attend school field trips, my son can't go, there's not enough support. When special activities happen at school, certain assemblies, no accommodations are made.
>
> (Evangeline, mother of a 7-year-old boy)

5 | Discussion

This study set out to identify the factors that contribute to school exclusion in autistic children, a critical issue that, despite its significant impact, has been largely overlooked in the literature. Our results indicate that parent satisfaction with the IEP process predicted the likelihood of exclusion, even after accounting for important demographic factors. Although the direction of this relationship cannot be determined from the current data, the findings suggest a relationship between greater satisfaction with the IEP process and lower rates of exclusion. This is supported by previous research indicating that when IEPs are effectively implemented and supported by adequate staff training, student outcomes improve significantly (Ruble and McGrew 2013). Additionally, when parents are actively involved in this process and their concerns are addressed, children are more likely to receive the appropriate supports needed to succeed in school. Indeed, parental advocacy has been identified as a key driver in ensuring the IEP process is responsive to a child's unique needs, particularly when schools actively collaborate with families (Rossetti et al. 2021). For example, this may include developing effective strategies to proactively manage challenging behaviors and ensuring necessary accommodations are in place. These results are also strengthened by studies demonstrating that a positive parent–teacher relationship predicted a lower likelihood of school exclusion for autistic children (Brede et al. 2017; Martin-Denham 2022; Sproston et al. 2017; Totsika et al. 2024). This collaborative approach can help foster a more inclusive environment, reduce disciplinary actions, and ensure better long-term outcomes for autistic students.

In contrast to Totsika et al.'s (2020) research, our results found that parent education and marital status did not significantly predict school exclusion. Extending this work, we also examined the relationship between family income and school exclusion; however, our findings were not significant. These mixed results suggest that further research is needed to better understand the role of socioeconomic factors in predicting

school exclusion. Consistent with Totsika et al. (2024), we found that hyperactivity (in this case, an ADHD diagnosis) was associated with an increased likelihood of school exclusion. This indicates that children with ADHD or hyperactive behaviors may require more targeted support and accommodations to address their unique challenges and reduce the risk of exclusion.

Corroborating previous research (Nordin et al. 2024; Sproston et al. 2017), our qualitative findings indicate that parents perceived their children's experiences of bullying as linked to an unsafe and unsupportive environment, which in some cases resulted in school exclusion through home-schooling and social isolation. Building on these findings, parents in the current study suggested several solutions to address this issue, including the creation of designated safe spaces for autistic students to help them cope with sensory overload and social challenges. Parents also suggested implementing more robust anti-bullying policies that emphasize early intervention, include peer education programs, ensure consistent responses to bullying, and provide staff training to effectively manage and prevent bullying behaviors. Similar to findings by Gray et al. (2023), parents highlighted the significance of cultivating an inclusive school culture that values diversity, understanding, and meaningful support for students with disabilities. Establishing this environment begins with school leadership and staff, who can achieve this through ongoing professional development, modeling empathy, and consistently demonstrating inclusive behaviors in their interactions with students.

Similar to the findings of Brede et al. (2017), our study showed that parents identified a lack of autism-specific teacher training as a significant factor contributing to school exclusion. Supporting our quantitative results, parents expressed frustrations with teachers not following their child's IEP and failing to recognize signs of distress. For example, the absence of sensory breaks often led to the escalation of problem behaviors, which resulted in children being sent home from school. Additionally, a lack of understanding of autistic students' needs and inappropriate responses to student behaviors, such as the use of physical restraints and seclusion measures, contributed to school exclusion. Less frequently articulated in prior research, parents also highlighted instances where their children were excluded from field trips due to insufficient staff support or were sent home for minor issues, such as distress caused by a nosebleed. In addition to the disruption to their work and employment, which has also been reported in other research (blinded for review, Under Review), some parents viewed this as a blatant violation of their child's right to an education and a failure on the school's part to provide proper support and planning. Furthermore, this is likely an underestimate of the full extent of school exclusion, as many parents in our study reported having to resort to homeschooling due to a lack of appropriate or safe school placement for their children, but reported this as a personal choice rather than a formal exclusion.

The current study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. One key limitation is the overrepresentation of mothers among the respondents, which may limit the generalizability of the results to fathers and other caregivers. Future studies could address this by directly targeting fathers in recruitment materials, perhaps by explicitly inviting them rather than using the general terms “parents” or “caregivers.” Another limitation is the reliance on a convenience sample, which may introduce selection bias and affect the generalizability of the findings to harder-to-reach families. Additionally, the cross-sectional design of the study means that causality cannot be determined. It is possible that school exclusion may increase the risk of bullying for autistic children, rather than bullying being a predictor of school exclusion. Longitudinal studies would be valuable in examining the long-term impact of IEP satisfaction, bullying, and teacher training on school exclusion.

Another limitation is the use of a single-item measure to assess parent satisfaction with the IEP process, which, while reducing participant burden, may not fully capture the complexity of this construct. Satisfaction with the IEP process can encompass multiple dimensions (e.g., relationship between the family and school team, implementation of IEP goals), none of which are fully captured in a single question. Similarly, school exclusion was measured dichotomously and did not differentiate between types (e.g., withdrawal due to a lack of supports vs. exclusion) or frequency of exclusion events. This limitation constrains the study's ability to examine potentially important patterns and relationships, such as whether repeated exclusions are more strongly associated with inadequate support services. Future research would benefit from more nuanced, multi-item measures that can better capture the variability and complexity of both constructs.

Moreover, future studies should include the perspectives of school staff and administrators to better understand the issues from their perspectives, particularly given that various reports by educators have highlighted under-funding and insufficient staff for students with special education needs as major problems in Ontario (Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario Equity Statement 2025; Mackenzie 2017). Finally, the qualitative findings from this study are exploratory in nature and were not designed to test hypotheses, meaning further research is needed to validate and rigorously test the themes identified in the qualitative component of the study.

6 | Conclusion

In conclusion, our research examined the relationship between parent satisfaction with the IEP process and school exclusion, as well as the factors parents perceive as most important in predicting school exclusion in their autistic children. Our findings highlight the significance of collaboration between parents, teachers, and school leadership to ensure that autistic students' basic right to an education is upheld. These results underscore the need for improved supports in educational settings, including more robust anti-bullying measures and a more inclusive approach to addressing student needs, as well as sufficient funding for support staff within schools to reduce the risk of school exclusion. Given that access to education is an important social determinant of health and well-being, as well as a human right, addressing these issues is critical to fostering more equitable outcomes for autistic students.

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Ethics Statement

Ethics approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Board, and informed consent was obtained from all parent participants included in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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