

**Threading Through School Exclusion: Sense of School Belonging and Absenteeism of
Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder**

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Abstract

School belonging is increasingly recognized as a key component of students' academic, social, and emotional wellbeing. While previous research has documented elevated rates of absenteeism and exclusion among Autistic students, less is known about how these experiences relate to students' sense of belonging to school, particularly from caregiver perspectives. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to address the gap in the literature regarding school exclusion of Autistic students by exploring the relationships between school belonging, absenteeism, family- and school-related factors. Data were drawn from an Ontario-wide survey exploring the experiences of K–12 Autistic students during the 2022–2023 academic year, in which 232 parents/caregivers reported on school belonging, attendance patterns, and exclusion. Findings were integrated using a weaving approach to provide a more comprehensive understanding of participants' school experiences. Quantitative analyses included correlational and linear regression analyses, while qualitative open-ended responses from 129 caregivers were interpreted using content analysis. Significant relationships emerged between school belonging, absenteeism, and class placement, with lower rates of school absence and more inclusive educational placements being associated with greater school belonging among Autistic students. Qualitative findings highlighted themes related to insufficient staffing, inadequate supports and accommodations, systemic barriers, school-based practices limiting attendance, social exclusion, inconsistent school-home communication, and the broader impacts of school experiences on families. Findings underscore the importance of inclusive education and appropriate supports in school environments to strengthen school belonging among Autistic students.

Keywords: *School belonging, Autism, Absenteeism, School Exclusion, Inclusive Education, Mixed Methods*

Introduction

Despite an increasing focus on inclusive education in Canada, Autistic students continue to face significant challenges, insufficient accommodations, and a growing prevalence in diagnoses (Grosvenor et al., 2024; Sarrett, 2018). According to the 2019 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth, about 1 in 50 children and youth aged 1 to 17 years in Canada were diagnosed with autism (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2022). Autism spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition defined by persistent difficulties in social communication and interaction alongside restricted or repetitive behaviors and interests, as outlined in the DSM-5-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). A diagnosis requires meeting all social-communication criteria, at least two forms of restricted or repetitive behaviors, early developmental onset, significant functional impact, and symptoms not better explained by intellectual disability (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). The mainstream school environment, which requires social communication, interaction and changing routines, can be particularly challenging for children on the autism spectrum in the absence of sufficient accommodations (Batten, 2005; Dargue et al., 2022; Leifler et al., 2021). This mismatch between student needs and school environments often results in social exclusion and peer rejection, contributing to significant declines in emotional and psychological well-being of children with autism (McKinlay et al., 2022). Autistic students face increased schedule modifications (i.e. shortened school days), higher rates of absenteeism, and higher drop-out rates (Totsika et al., 2020), and are excluded or suspended from school at higher rates compared to peers with other disabilities (Parsons et al., 2009; Starr et al., 2006). A 2020 study demonstrated that levels of persistent non-attendance, school refusal and school withdrawal are high and concerning among K-12 students with autism (Totsika et al., 2020). With the physical exclusion from the school community (i.e. reduced school days and absenteeism) also comes the psychosocial aspects of inclusion and exclusion (i.e. school connectedness and sense of belonging). Research suggests that school belonging is positively associated with lower attendance and negatively associated with dropout rates (Brookmeyer et al., 2006).

Concerns surrounding chronic absenteeism, particularly among students with disabilities, have grown in previous years. Although national data do not exist, recent reports show that the proportion of students who were chronically absent increased from approximately 20-30% of students to 50-60% over the past five years across multiple school districts (Carman & Wesley,

2024). Chronic absenteeism among K–12 students, defined as missing 10% or more school days (excused or unexcused), has been linked to a range of adverse outcomes (Whitley et al., 2025). Frequent absence has significant short and long-term effects on children’s academic performance, social functioning, socioemotional development, and educational attainment (Allen, Diamond-Myrsten & Rollins, 2018; Ansari & Gottfried, 2021; Gottfried, 2009; Gottfried, 2014a). In turn, long-term effects of missing school include increased tendency to violence, injury, substance abuse (Townsend et al., 2007) and lower income, physical and psychiatric health, and life expectancy in adulthood (Kearney, 2008a). Youth with severe or chronic attendance difficulties also experience high levels of discomfort, distress and anxiety in relation to school as well as reduced motivation for academic achievement, connectedness and sense of belonging to the school community (Ansari et al., 2020; Kearney, 2008a). Although the surge of absenteeism is a nationwide concern, research highlights that marginalized groups—particularly students with disabilities—face heightened vulnerability to school attendance problems (SAPs) and educational exclusion (Gottfried et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2019). Due to the interaction of their primary disabilities and co-occurring health conditions, students with disabilities often exhibit higher levels of various forms of absenteeism (e.g. health related, school refusal, truancy). Nonetheless, each disability presents with unique challenges which might create specific trendlines in absenteeism (Nordin et al., 2024).

Canadian research examining the nuanced interplay of physical and psychological school exclusion, including school belonging and attendance problems, experienced by Autistic youth remains largely unexamined. Some challenges in this field of research include the significant variability in the needs and profiles of Autistic students (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008b; Humphrey & Symes, 2011), and a disconnect between inclusive education policies and their practical implementation (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008a; McGillicuddy & O’Donnell, 2014). As a result, the aim of this study is to fill the gap in Canadian literature regarding school exclusion among an Ontario-based sample of Autistic students by exploring their sense of school belonging and school attendance problems as well as the influence of a range of demographic and school-related factors. The autism community has expressed diverse perspectives and preferences on identity-first and person-first language, with many individuals on the spectrum preferring identity-first terms such as “Autistic.” In recognition of these perspectives and for the purposes of this study, students with autism spectrum disorder will be referred to as “Autistic children”

throughout. This study will contribute to the expanding literature on school belonging and school attendance problems that contribute to school exclusion and realities faced by Autistic students in Canada. At its core, this research seeks to offer an in-depth understanding of Autistic students' school exclusion experiences and ultimately contribute to strategies that foster more meaningful inclusion and support for the autism community within educational settings.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded by the bioecological systems model by Bronfenbrenner (1979), and specifically the Kids and Teens at School (KiTes) framework by Melvin and colleagues (2019), which further explains the bioecological model in relation to school attendance. While school belonging is the core of this study, particular attention is given to how it relates to school attendance, with attendance considered to be a basic prerequisite of belonging – students have to be at least physically present at school to have the possibility of meaningful inclusion.

The bioecological model explains human development as the result of ongoing interactions between an individual and the multiple environmental systems they are part of. The theory was originally developed in 1979 and later revised to include the child as an active agent whose characteristics influence and interact with the environments rather than a passive recipient of influences. The 2006 revised model also emphasized the importance of time and shifted the focus to processes rather than solely highlighting structural environments. The bioecological model captures the importance of both individual and environmental factors that affect development and experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). It emphasizes that development is shaped not just by personal characteristics but also by the layers of context surrounding the person and the interactions (processes) that occur within those social and physical contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The model is made up of four major components: process, person, context, time. The model places the ecological contexts in nested structures, which are categorized in four levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystems comprise the immediate contexts to which the child is exposed, such as family (e.g. caregivers, siblings), home life, school, peers and teachers. Mesosystem represents a system in which two or more actors from different microsystems of the child can be found. In other words, the interactions and relationships among people across different microsystems form the mesosystem that surrounds the developing child. For instance, the teacher-parent relationship, where the child is the point of connection, constitute a mesosystem.

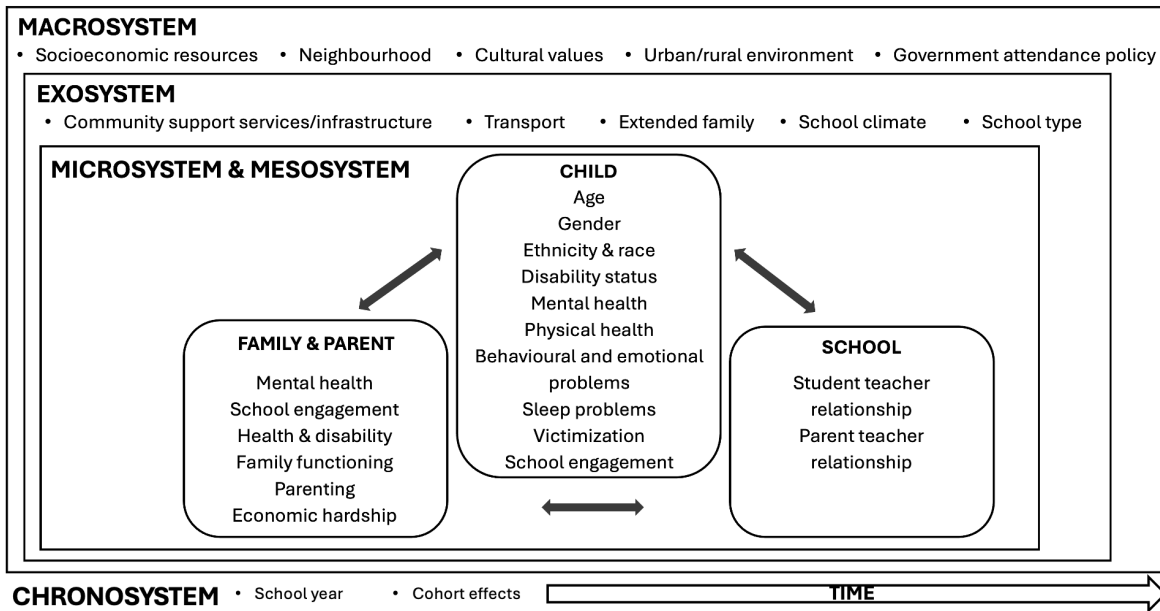
The exosystem includes settings that indirectly affect the child even though they are not directly involved. Parents' workplace policies which affect parental stress, availability at home and overall financial stability as well as social and health services, school boards, local government are examples within the exosystem. These factors influence the child's access to services and exposure to various experiences within their immediate and broader environments. In the model by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the macrosystem encompasses the broader cultural values, social norms, and societal structures that shape the smaller systems (e.g. micro, meso, exo). This larger context contains certain values and rules which inform legal, educational, economic and political systems, affecting the growing individual's experiences and beliefs. An individual's cultural perspective on disability or inclusive education policies is developed within the macrosystem. The last system which encompasses all systems, chronosystem, refers to how major life events and sociohistorical changes unfold over time and affect the smaller systems, values and rules. A family relocation, parental divorce, growing up during a major technological shift, global economic crisis or pandemic mold the child's life and environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

The Kids and Teens at School (KiTeS) framework by Melvin and colleagues (2019) is a recently proposed conceptual multi-level framework nested in the structure of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. The framework classifies protective and risk factors associated with school attendance within each bioecological level of influence and system, each differing in proximity to the child (Figure 1). At the micro- and meso-system levels, the KiTeS framework places child characteristics (e.g. age, gender, disabilities), parental characteristics (e.g. physical health, parenting style, parental involvement), family (e.g. functioning, composition) and school characteristics (e.g. school climate, school belonging, teacher support, peer relationships, inclusive policies) as associated with school attendance problems (Jeynes, 2007; Munkhaugen et al., 2017; Totsika et al., 2020). At the exosystem, socio-economic status, financial stability (e.g. parental employment), availability of community services, housing, transportation options and school factors (e.g. organisational factors) were identified as factors affecting school non-attendance. At the macro-level, the 2019 study proposed that factors related to school non-attendance include government policy on attendance, cultural values and neighbourhood characteristics (e.g. poverty, household size and age average). Applying the KiTeS model outlined by Melvin and colleagues (2019) to SAPs in Autistic students will help underscore

factors associated with non-attendance in this population and to consider the relationship with school belonging. In summary, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory and the KiTeS framework will be used to guide research questions, data analyses, and interpretation and discussion of results.

Figure 1

The Kids and Teens at School (KiTeS) framework by Melvin and colleagues (2019)



Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to review the current body of literature on school exclusion, primarily the constructs of sense of belonging at school and school attendance problems, and identify the gaps in this field of intersectional research within populations of Autistic students. The following review will investigate the outlined topics: (1) conceptualization of sense of belonging at school, (2) conceptualization of school attendance problems, (3) intersectionality of SAPs and sense of belonging to school, and gaps in the literature.

Conceptualization of Sense of Belonging at School

Education research and other fields have proposed different definitions for the sense of belonging (SOB) over the years. Students' belongingness to educational settings, which is a more context-aligned construct, is yet to reach a consistent and systemic conceptualization due to differing terminology, measurements and definitions across studies (Allen & Bowles, 2012).

Sense of belonging to school has been described by diverse terminology such as school bonding (Jenkins, 1997), school climate (Goodenow, 1991; Ma, 2003), school identification (Finn, 1989), school attachment (Mouton et al., 1996), school connectedness (Libbey, 2004), school orientation (Jessor et al., 1995), school membership (Goodenow & Grady, 1993), and a sense of community. Willms (2003) conceptualized school belonging as a psychological construct grounded in students feeling attached to school, feeling accepted, and valued by others (e.g. peers, teachers, staff) within the school setting. Libbey clearly defines school connectedness as “feeling close to, a part of, and happy at school; feeling that teachers care about students and treat them fairly; trouble getting along with teachers and students; and feeling safe at school” (p.62, 2007) and argues that school belonging is related more to students’ emotional experience of their school. Goodenow and Grady’s (1993) definition is the most frequently cited and broadly accepted within the school belonging literature and outlines school SOB as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (p. 61). Other scholars have interpreted sense of belonging as interconnected with related constructs, such as positive interactions with people in the school setting (Hamm & Faircloth, 2005), social identity (Sanders & Munford, 2016), sense of community (Osterman, 2000), and student engagement (Finn & Voelkl, 1993). Despite differences in definitions, the literature has consistently identified measures influencing SOB such as the presence of positive peer relationships, teacher support and care, parental support, commitment to learning and schoolwork, participation in extracurriculars, and student safety (Libbey, 2004).

Researchers agree that fostering and building a sense of belonging has a positive effect on multiple aspects of student outcomes. Enhanced school belonging rates are associated with higher academic outcomes, motivation and effort (Bryan et al., 2012; Goodenow, 1991; Sánchez et al., 2005). Goodenow (1991) revealed that students’ belongingness in a class was associated to their expectations of academic achievements, intrinsic motivation to complete schoolwork, grades, and teachers’ evaluations of students’ effort in courses. SOB has been revealed as a significant predictor and mediator of academic achievement. A 2012 study found that Grade 11 and 12 students who were generally more involved in school and related activities (i.e. academics, arts, sports, and clubs) reported higher sense of school belonging, grade point average and academic engagement (Knifsend & Graham, 2012). In a similar sense, school

belonging has positive correlations with students' school engagement and participation in extracurricular activities. Students who take part in extracurriculars at school reported higher rates of school belongingness (Blomfield & Barber, 2009; Knifsend & Graham, 2012). Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological model, factors at the individual level (e.g. ethnicity, academic motivation) have also been found to influence school belonging. Looking at demographic factors, a recent meta-analysis found that gender had a modest association with school belonging, with girls reported to have a stronger sense of belonging than boys (Allen, Kern, et al., 2018). In a longitudinal study of 572 high school students (ages 14–19), school belonging tended to shift over the years. In this sample, girls' sense of belonging dropped over time, while boys' remained more stable (Neel & Fuligni, 2013). School belonging and socio-emotional outcomes, including students' perceptions of their self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy and mental health exert reciprocal influence on one another (Arslan, 2020; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Ma, 2003). A study exploring parental and psychological variables in relation to academic achievement found that school engagement and self-esteem were significantly associated (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004). In another study, students' reports of their perceived sense of belonging to school was found to predict low absenteeism. Children and adolescents who felt a strong sense of belonging attended school more regularly (Sánchez et al., 2005). On the other end of the "school belonging" spectrum, students lacking a general sense of belonging to their school experience disengagement. K-12 students who have poor sense of school belonging have been found to be more likely to be disinterested and bored at school and eventually drop out (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011). Similarly, students who do not develop a connection with their school, such as failing to view peers as sources of support, are more at risk of higher rates of absenteeism (De Wit et al., 2010).

On a broad level, the school's environmental conditions (e.g. classroom and school size, presence of facilities and time for leisure, opportunities to play and socialize with peers) are significant predictors of whether students feel that they belong to their school (Slaten et al., 2016; Waters et al., 2010). In this climate, students' general sense of school belonging is similarly linked to their perception of being accepted and supported by those in the school community (e.g. peers, teachers, staff). Studies have found that peer support, teacher support and parental support are positively associated with students' sense of belonging to their school (Slaten et al., 2016; Waters et al., 2010). A 2015 study found that teacher-student support and

care was a stronger mediator of increased school belonging compared to peer-student relationship (Raufelder et al., 2015). Along similar lines, the literature has also consistently identified that students' perception of feeling safe in the school environment is positively correlated with school belonging (Hallinan, 2008). In the case of poor peer relationships (Raufelder et al., 2015), bullying (Cunningham, 2007), and repeated victimization (Holt & Espelage, 2003), K-12 students' sense of connectedness to their school decreased significantly.

For students with disabilities, class placement, ranging from fully inclusive to fully segregated, is one school-related factor that has been found to impact school belonging. A recent study of students with physical disabilities found that most felt socially and emotionally included at school. About half were taught in segregated educational settings, and these students showed poorer academic self-perceptions and greater difficulty with peer acceptance (Finnvold & Dokken, 2024). One systematic review looked at six studies comparing students with extensive support needs who learn in regular classrooms with same-age peers versus those who learn in separate, segregated settings. Students with extensive support needs were found to do better socially and academically, when they are included in general education classrooms rather than taught in separate settings (Mansouri et al., 2022). Barron and colleagues (2024) also reported limited support for self-contained (i.e. segregated) class placements in their systematic review. Across the 15 studies included in the study, only three found that students in self-contained settings showed better belonging or engagement outcomes (Holm et al., 2020; Jones & Hensley, 2012; Pellerin et al., 2022). Overall, the type of class placement was found to be a crucial factor in social inclusion, academic self-concept and sense of belonging.

Sense of Belonging to School in Autistic Students

Autistic students may face unique challenges affecting belonging, making their school connection experiences different from those of typically developing peers. Despite the limited research on this topic, studies have consistently found lower levels of school connectedness in Autistic youth compared to peers (Bailey et al., 2020; Hebron, 2018; Osborne & Reed, 2011). Autistic students have reported feelings of exclusion due to negative teacher dynamics and interactions, as well as fluctuating and sensory school climate (Horgan et al., 2023). Moreover, social communication difficulties (e.g., interpreting cues, initiating/maintaining interactions) and autism-related stigma result in this population being more at risk of bullying victimization,

loneliness and social isolation (Cook et al., 2021; Hebron, 2018; Horgan et al., 2023). These risk factors are prone to negatively affect their sense of belonging to school (Atkinson et al., 2025).

Limited research has explored the influence of age and gender on the school belonging of Autistic students, although rates of diagnosis are significantly higher for male Autistic students and the experiences of female Autistic students are less well understood (Kreiser & White, 2014). A recent study where Autistic students were interviewed found that the students often demonstrated a desire to belong but adapted their behaviour to be able to gain a sense of school belongingness and socially blend in (Myles et al., 2019). Cook et al. (2018) found that girls with autism masked their autism-related traits and differences to feel belonging in their school environment and reduce the likelihood of being picked on. It seems that Autistic youth, particularly girls, feel the need to change themselves and conceal their social difficulties in order to gain respect and social acceptance. In terms of age or grade level, a study by Hebron (2017), examined the experiences of 28 Autistic students transitioning from primary to secondary school to better understand the impact of the transition on school connectedness. Autistic students reported positive levels of school connectedness across the transition, although their scores remained lower than those of their typically developing peers. The gap between the two groups narrowed significantly during the first year of secondary school, with Autistic students' group reporting improving levels of school connectedness. Another study which had a sample of secondary school age Autistic students fully included in mainstream classrooms (and not in attached special units) reported that older students tended to report stronger feelings of belonging, possibly reflecting the benefits of longer time spent in the school environment (Osborne & Reed, 2011).

Previous literature has also looked into protective and environmental factors related to sense of school belonging for Autistic youth. For students with autism or autism tendencies, a caring and supportive school implies somewhere they can belong to and is inclusive for students of all backgrounds (Omiya et al., 2023). In a study which explored effective prevention approaches for increased mental health risk problems in Autistic youth, the sense of belonging (i.e. connectedness) to school and the capacity for self and affect regulation in the face of stress (i.e. resilience) were found to be the two most essential interconnected protective factors (Shochet et al., 2016). For Autistic youth, social connectedness and sense of belonging to school may be key contributors to positive school experiences (El-Salahi et al., 2025). In a study which

interviewed Autistic female students, participants often underscored wanting to blend in with peers and described that social inclusion is a key determinant of their feelings of belonging at school (Myles et al., 2019). Autistic students have informed this area of research by identifying factors affecting their sense of belonging and achievement at school. Access to teachers with supportive and caring qualities, as well as positive peer relationships were identified as the most frequently mentioned factors influencing their sense of belonging at school (Saggers, 2015; Saggers et al., 2011; Saggers et al., 2024).

In relation to social connectedness, teacher support was found to be a crucial factor for Autistic students establishing high rates of school belonging. Autistic students have been identified as a group of learners particularly seeking a sense of belonging from teachers (Omiya et al., 2023). A 2011 study found that successful staff training was the most influential protective factor and promoted higher rates of inclusion, social behaviours and perceived school belonging in Autistic students. When teachers viewed themselves as more adequately trained and competent, Autistic children demonstrated better social skills and a greater sense of school belonging. Moreover, students reported greater school belonging when the literal size of the school was bigger. This was notably the case for students who were diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. This group of students also reported that their sense of school belonging was positively affected by other children with disabilities or special education needs, as well as more support staff (Osborne & Reed, 2011). Consistent with this, Hodges et al. (2020) found that environmental factors (i.e. school climate and availability of supports) significantly impacted Autistic students' ability to participate and feel like they belonged at school. A strong sense of belonging to school was established as integral to Autistic students' engagement and participation in school (Hodges et al., 2020). The school having a culture of acceptance and commitment to inclusivity on a broad level, as well as Autistic youth having solid friendships and a perceived sense of belonging to their peer group and school in general all resulted in higher levels of school-related well-being and outcomes (El-Salahi et al., 2025; Humphrey, 2008; Osborne & Reed, 2011; Sciutto et al., 2012).

Conceptualization of School Attendance Problems

Student absenteeism has been conceptualized differently owing to researcher's background disciplines and research objectives. SAP literature shows that consensus on the understanding and definition of absenteeism is yet to exist. The binary conceptualization of

absenteeism as “excused and unexcused absences” has received great attention in scholarly work (DeSocio et al., 2007; Gottfried, 2009, 2013; Wood et al., 2012) but neglects the underlying reasons for student absenteeism (Birioukov, 2016). Kearney (2003) proposed the conceptualization of absenteeism as problematic and nonproblematic absences. Nonproblematic absenteeism is defined as a formal school absence authorized by both caregivers and school staff and deemed as legitimate and non-detrimental to the child. This definition encompasses “short-term or temporary absences, self-corrective school absenteeism, and long-term absences attributable to illness, natural disaster, or other unusual conditions that are appropriately compensated for in some way (e.g., home schooling, vocational training, credit by examination)” (Kearney, 2003, p.59). Problematic absenteeism, as defined by Kearney, has three conditions: “(1) have missed at least 25 percent of total school time for at least two weeks; (2) experience severe difficulty attending classes for at least two weeks with significant interference in a child’s or family’s daily routine, and/or (3) are absent for at least 10 days of school during any 15-week period while school is in session (i.e., a minimum of 15% days absent from school)” (2008b, p.265). In most of the research literature as well as schoolboards worldwide, absenteeism is measured dichotomously as either chronic (10% or more absences) or not chronic, or on a continuous scale of days or classes missed in a given period of time (e.g. a school year) (Gee, 2018; Gottfried et al., 2019; Sasso & Sansour, 2024; Whitley et al., 2025).

Building upon Kearney’s (2008b) criteria of different levels of nonattendance, Heyne and colleagues (2019) expanded the framework by categorizing problematic absenteeism into four subtypes: school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal, and school exclusion. School refusal occurs when a young person is reluctant or refuses to attend school accompanied by temporary distress linked to school avoidance (e.g., anxiety, tantrums, fear, physical distress) or chronic distress that hinders attendance (e.g., depressive mood, sleep issues). Systemic and environmental factors such as peer bullying, academic stress, and teacher conflict may also lead to school refusal. This reluctance or emotional difficulties may be evident through late arrivals, skipping whole school days for weeks, months etc. and being absent for long periods of time while parents are aware of their absence and the young person is not attempting to hide their absence from their caregivers. Parents must be actively working to resolve the issue of child’s nonattendance, and the child’s resistance should be related to parental efforts for the absenteeism to be labeled as school refusal. While Heyne and colleagues have contributed considerably to the field by creating clear

classifications of literature, a great body of research has previously focused on school phobia, refusal and anxiety (Egger et al., 2003; Ingul et al., 2012; Kearney & Albano, 2004; Richards & Hadwin, 2011). Recent years have seen the shift of research terminology to “emotionally based school avoidance” to more accurately reflect school refusal driven by fear and distress associated with attending school and to minimize child- or family-focused blame (Halligan & Cryer, 2022; Klan et al., 2024; Leduc et al., 2024; Ulaş et al., 2024).

Truancy, the second subtype, is defined as a child or adolescent’s absence for a partial or whole day, or they are absent from their assigned location although being at school (e.g. student is outside in school grounds at the rather than in class) (Heyne et al., 2019). This absence occurs when the child or adolescent attempts to hide their nonattendance from their parents and is unauthorized by the school authorities. On the other hand, school withdrawal occurs when a young person’s absence is known by the parents and is in conjunction with parents’ attempts to keep the student home (e.g. intentional, willing) or the lack thereof to get the child to attend school (e.g., lack of interest in the child’s academics). In certain cases, parents who want their child to regularly attend school may be nonetheless unable to ensure this expectation due to their family’s medical, social or financial constraints (Galloway, 1982; Kruithof & Keppens, 2025). Research has long highlighted the risks associated with truancy, and a substantial body of work over the decades has examined its causes, consequences, and influencing factors (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Gastic, 2008; Henry, 2007; Vaughn et al., 2013).

The final subtype of problematic absenteeism that Heyne and colleagues described, school exclusion, refers to the child or adolescent’s absence from school or school activities attributable to decisions made by the school. The decision may stem from inappropriate and policy-violating disciplinary practices, such as the school finding it more convenient to internally suspend a student. School exclusion can also stem from the school’s inability or reluctance to accommodate students’ academic, physical, medical, social-emotional, behavioural needs. For instance, the school board asking a student with learning disabilities to be picked up early twice a week due to insufficient teaching support is also considered a case of school exclusion (Heyne et al., 2019). The school’s decision to limit a student’s attendance beyond standard policies also constitutes a form of school exclusion. Within the umbrella of school exclusions, a subtype of absenteeism which remains under-explored in the literature is typically referred to as ‘partial’, ‘shortened’ or ‘modified’ days. This practice entails the planned or responsive use of shortened

school days for students with disabilities, in which they are asked or required to attend for limited period in a day or week or to stay home temporarily without a formal suspension or expulsion. Canadian media and advocacy groups, especially those promoting inclusive education, have played a major role in highlighting this issue (Chang, 2025; Inclusion Canada and Inclusive Education Canada, 2025; New Brunswick Child and Youth Advocate, 2024). Although this topic has received limited scholarly attention, some studies and government reports addressed partial-day attendance within broader discussions of school exclusion (Demie, 2023; Martin-Denham, 2022; Timpson, 2019).

It is important to note that a consensus on the meaning of this subtype of absenteeism is yet to be reached due to the ambiguities in differentiating appropriate and inappropriate exclusions. According to Kearney's (2008b) criteria for problematic absenteeism, school exclusion of any kind can become problematic for students. Conversely, the definition of school exclusion by Heyne et al. (2019) includes inappropriate practices and excludes lawful and legitimate suspensions. However, over time, all school exclusions—whether deemed appropriate or inappropriate—become problematic (Heyne et al., 2019), as even appropriate disciplinary exclusions can have negative consequences for students with special needs and disabilities (Brede et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2004). The current study will use the term 'SAP' when referring to any difficulty a student is experiencing in relation to absenteeism, whether chronic or not.

School Attendance Problems among Autistic Students

Existing research has shown that school attendance problems among Autistic students is highly prevalent. A 2018 study by Black and Zablotzky reported that students with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, intellectual disability or other developmental delay are four times more at risk of chronic absenteeism than neurotypical students. Compared to students with other disabilities, Autistic students or students with an intellectual disability were still found to experience the highest rates of nonattendance. In a study with a sample of 486 participants (mean age = 11; 69% male), Totsika et al. (2020) revealed that Autistic students missed about five school days per month on average. Their findings also underscored that 64% of Autistic students were absent at least one day every month and 43% missed more than 10% of school, meeting the threshold for chronic absenteeism. Among the participants, the most prevalent reason for absenteeism was school refusal, representing 43% of missed school days; 9% of absence was due to exclusions and 9% to withdrawal. Older students were more likely to miss school. In a second

study, Munkhaugen et al. (2017), examined school refusal behaviour among a sample of 216 students aged 9-16 attending mainstream classes (86% male), 78 of whom were Autistic. School refusal behaviour was significantly higher in Autistic students as compared to typically developing students although some missed just 1 day in a month, while others missed every school day of that month. Once again, older students were significantly more likely to miss school.

Autistic youth constitute a particular subgroup of learners that find the school environment particularly challenging as it is based upon communication and socializing. Social interactions are stressful for Autistic children, which make them more prone to limited participation, peer and school exclusion (Roberts & Simpson, 2016). The non-attendance of Autistic students is a multifaceted issue, impacting achievement outcomes (Mayes et al., 2020), overall well-being, integration, social engagement and education (Simpson et al., 2018; 2019). While school absenteeism is a phenomenon studied on a broad level, certain factors can be more directly related to autism (Adams, 2022). Several studies have investigated the individual factors which impact, predict or maintain higher SAPs in Autistic students. Autism has a high rate of co-occurrence with neurodevelopmental conditions (e.g. ADHD, learning disabilities), mental health issues (Hossain et al., 2020), and somatic and medical complications (Vorstman et al., 2017). The high comorbidity of psychiatric and physical health issues heightens Autistic students' vulnerability to absenteeism (Finning et al., 2019). Consistent with this, Munkhaugen et al., (2019) found a positive association between school refusal and a range of emotional and behaviour problems among Autistic students. Among the subtypes of problematic absenteeism, others have found that school refusal or aversion emerges as the most common in Autistic students (Adams, 2022). Previous research has found that mood disorders (e.g. depression) and anxiety – both highly prevalent in ASD (Hossain et al., 2020) – may increase the risk of school refusal (Kearney, 2008a).

Environmental influences such as the school environment, family dynamics and system-level factors can also play a role in the attendance patterns of students (Attendance Works, 2025), including those who are Autistic. Within the family context, multiple studies found strong evidence linking absenteeism in Autistic students and parental unemployment and illness of other family members. Totsika and colleagues (2020) reported an increase of 52% to 78% in child's non-attendance when parents reported not having paid unemployment, a finding also

reported in a study by Munkhaugen et al. (2017). Similarly, a 2022 study found an increase of 85% in attendance problems in cases of parental unemployment (Adams, 2022). In terms of sociodemographic factors, the illness of other family members has been reported to be significantly correlated with Autistic youth's school refusal behaviour (Munkhaugen et al., 2017; Sasso & Sansour, 2024). A recent study revealed a strong correlation between parents' high depression scores and increased risk of school refusal in Autistic students, highlighting the influence of parents' own mental health (Adams, 2022).

Risk factors on a systemic school level such as insufficient accommodations, inclusive policy and educational placements increase absentee risk (Dargue et al., 2022; Leifler et al., 2021). At its root, the lack of awareness and knowledge about autism may also maintain the continuity of SAPs in Autistic students (Nordin et al., 2024; Preece & Howley, 2018). Gray et al. (2023) noted that school and classroom conditions such as the number of people, bright lighting, and unstructured scheduling affected Autistic students' sensory sensitivities (e.g., feelings of overwhelm, sensory overload). Munkhaugen et al. (2017) found that Autistic students who attended a mainstream school were more likely to miss school. At the school community level, students' sense of belonging and the quality of their relationships can affect students' attendance patterns, likely in a reciprocal relationship. In one study, parents of Autistic children reported that negative peer interactions, teachers' attitudes, and school subjects precipitated school refusal behaviour (Munkhaugen et al., 2017). Moreover, Autistic students experience higher rates of bullying compared to non-Autistic students (Maïano et al., 2016), which can in turn affect attendance. In a 2020 study, more than half of Autistic boys who experienced bullying also experienced school refusal (Bitsika et al., 2021). Recent research has underscored the increased risk of nonattendance related to bullying (McClemont et al., 2021; Ochi et al., 2020). Clearly, peer relationships and school belonging in general are influential variables predicting school attendance for Autistic students.

Although Autistic students are at high risk of experiencing adverse academic, psychosocial and emotional outcomes throughout their schooling, there is a limited body of research specifically aimed at defining and assessing the physical and psychosocial aspects of inclusion and exclusion for this group of learners. Studies have consistently found that feelings of acceptance, supportive teacher relationships, and positive peer interactions have been associated with improved school belonging (Omiya et al., 2023; Saggars, 2015) and reduced

absenteeism (O'Hagan et al., 2024; Preece & Howley, 2018). However, few studies have examined these issues in the Canadian education context, particularly those that include elementary school students or consider parents' perspectives. The scarcity of literature in this area underscores that more research is needed to explore the school belonging and absenteeism experiences of Autistic students. Addressing these gaps can help develop a more nuanced understanding of how belonging is related to absenteeism among Autistic students, and to inform inclusive practices in school life.

The Current Study

As previously discussed, school exclusion is a multifaceted issue linked to academic, social, and financial outcomes that can negatively affect students (Arslan, 2020). Despite growing concerns around SAPs, limited research has explored these issues among Autistic students. Examining the complex interplay of the psychosocial inclusion/exclusion (sense of belonging at school) and the physical inclusion/exclusion (reduced school days and absenteeism) of Autistic students will help shape future research, policy development, and school-based supports. This study aims to fill the gap in the literature regarding school exclusion of Autistic students by exploring the relationships between sense of belonging at school, partial or modified attendance, school-related and sociodemographic factors. The following questions will be explored using data from a survey completed by Canadian caregivers of students with special education needs and disabilities (including autism), following the end of the 2022/2023 academic years.

Research Questions

How do family and school factors relate to school belonging among Autistic students in K–12 settings?

1. How and to what extent do school absenteeism rates, demographic (i.e. family income, parent education level) and school factors (i.e. grade, class placement) predict sense of belonging among a sample of Autistic students?
2. How do parents of Autistic children describe their experiences regarding their child's school attendance, inclusion, and sense of school belonging?

Methodological Framework

Study Design

In order to explore experiences of inclusion and exclusion for a sample of Autistic students, the study employed a concurrent mixed-methods design using secondary data analysis. The mixed methods design offered the strength of pairing strong quantitative evidence with explanatory insights provided by qualitative data, offering a more robust understanding than either approach alone (Castro et al., 2010). In this study, analyses of the quantitative data allowed for insight into relationships between sense of school belonging and absenteeism experienced by Autistic students, as well as key contextual variables such as family demographics and school inclusion factors (grade, class placement, frequency of absences). The qualitative data allowed for an exploration of parents' views on their children's school experiences related to the key study variables. Bringing together both types of data allowed for a deeper, more complex understanding of the experiences of Autistic students in relation to their inclusion and exclusion at school.

Recruitment

In the spring of 2023, a team of researchers, of which I am a member, conducted an Ontario-based survey (Ontario School Inclusion Survey) to examine the experiences of K-12 students with disabilities with respect to school exclusion, seclusion and restraint. The study recruited parents/guardians/caregivers of school-aged students with disabilities or special educational needs across the province of Ontario to take part in the survey. Only participants whose child/children were enrolled in school in Ontario during the 2022-2023 academic year were eligible to participate in the study. Our partner organization, Community Living Ontario (CLO), led participant recruitment, and members played an active role throughout nearly all stages of the study. Participants were recruited through an array of social media advertisement (e.g. Facebook advertisement posts) and information disseminated through CLO as well as their various community organization partners dedicated to supporting individuals with disabilities. The promoted posts contained a link which led interested individuals to a webpage containing more information about the study and the start to the survey.

The survey first presented a consent statement regarding voluntary participation, as well as detailed information about ethical approval, confidentiality, anonymity, data security and mental health resources that could support participants should they experience distress or

difficulty. Participants agreeing to take part were provided with the full survey to complete. Those who began the survey could enter a draw for Amazon gift cards via a process distinct from the survey to ensure anonymity. The survey also stated that participants could reach out to the team if they had questions or needed help of any kind to complete the survey.

Upon closure of the survey, we received more than 800 responses. However, responses which did not provide consent or were clearly false in nature were removed. These false responses included surveys completed in a very short period of time (e.g. under 2 minutes), inconsistent student age/grade/school level (e.g., student is 5 years old and is in Grade 8), mostly incomplete surveys, duplicate responses from the same IP address etc. AI-produced open-ended responses that were clearly inconsistent with the two final survey prompts and appeared to be generically generated text (e.g., “Schools sometimes collaborate with external organizations or institutions, such as community centers or universities, which may lead to modified or part-time school schedules to accommodate joint programs or projects.”) were also removed. These responses did not reference the respondent’s child, the school context, or the constructs under study and were therefore deemed invalid for analysis. After rigorous reviews by two research team members and a manual process of elimination, the final dataset comprised 540 responses. From the final data set acquired, this study focused on participants who have identified that their child had previously been identified with autism spectrum disorder ($n = 232$).

Participant Demographics

Of the 232 total respondents who indicated that they were the parent/caregiver of an Autistic child, the majority were mothers (80%), followed by fathers (14%) and grandparents (3%). Families in this sample had one (35%), two (43%) or three or more children (22%). Parents who had more than one child with disabilities were asked to complete the survey with only one child in mind, with the option of completing additional surveys for each additional child with disability. Most parents had English as a first language (90%). About 2% had French as a first language and the remainder listed a range of other languages. Most parents identified as White (87%), First Nations, Métis or Inuit (8%), Black (4%) and less than 1% East Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American and Southeast Asian as well as “Other” responses. Approximately 7% of parent/caregivers identified as having mixed ethnicity. About 12% of the parents had a graduate degree, about 35% had a university degree, about 38% had a college diploma or apprenticeship certificate, and the remainder had most or all of a high school

diploma. About 15% of parents had an income of \$30,000 or less, about 35% had an income of between \$30,000 and \$60,000, about 18% had an income of between \$60,000 and \$90,000 and about 32% had a family income of over \$90,000 Canadian dollars (Table 1).

Table 1*Summary of Demographic Variables of Participants*

Demographic Variable	n	%
Participant	232	
Mother	185	79.7
Father	32	13.8
Grandparent	7	3.0
Other	8	3.4
Number of Children in Family	218	
1	77	35.3
2	93	42.7
3+	48	22.0
First Language	231	
English	208	90.0
French	5	2.2
Other	18	7.8
Ethnicity	231	
White	201	87.0
First Nations, Métis or Inuit	18	7.8
Black	10	4.3
Latin American	5	2.2
Mixed	15	6.5
Other	18	7.8
Highest Level of Education	231	
Graduate degree (Masters, PhD)	27	11.7
University degree	80	34.6
College diploma or apprenticeship	88	38.1
High school diploma	33	14.3
Less than high school	3	1.3
Family Income	207	
\$30,000 or less	31	15.0
\$30,000 to \$60,000	73	35.3
\$60,001 to \$90,000	37	17.9
Over \$90,000	66	31.9

Note. Participant who selected “prefer not to say” were excluded from analyses. Percentages exceed 100 percent because participants were able to select more than one ethnic or cultural background.

Measures

In order to develop the Ontario School Inclusion Survey, the research team first conducted a search of existing Canadian surveys exploring school exclusion, seclusion and/or restraint. Surveys and reports from stakeholders (i.e. ministry of education, community organizations, researchers) in BC, Alberta, and Manitoba were located and examined (Autism Advocacy Ontario, 2019; Bartlett & Ellis, 2020, 2021a, 2021b; Inclusion Alberta, 2018; Inclusion BC, 2013, 2018; Manitoba Education, 2021). We conducted an in-depth review of their survey items, such as the scale items and open-ended questions in the Inclusion Alberta (2018) report (e.g., Did you give permission for your child to be placed in seclusion?). Most focused mainly on seclusion and restraint so, guided by previous surveys, we then used or created items related to exclusion and inclusion (e.g. modified days, absenteeism, exclusion from field trips) for the purposes of the study.

The original draft of the full survey was reviewed by members of the partner organization (i.e. Community Living Ontario) and their advisory board, including parents of children with disabilities. Feedback was obtained through virtual meeting and several written submissions. Reviewers made recommendations regarding reducing the overall length of the survey, while increasing clarity of wording in items and response options. Detailed suggestions consisted of sending the survey at the end of the school year to try to capture the full year, reducing categories in the demographic questions for ease of completion, adding two questions for disability identification, providing class placement options that align with Ontario-required options, and adding questions about the schedule and length of time of exclusions. The research team integrated the suggestions into the survey and translated the updated version into French. The final survey in French was also reviewed by French-speaking members of the partner organization. The final survey contained 56 questions in total and took approximately 5-25 minutes to complete at participants discretion.

The survey comprised four main sections: Demographics, Inclusion/Exclusion, Seclusion and Restraint. Given the current focus on inclusion/exclusion and school attendance problems, the seclusion and restraint sections of the survey will not be detailed presently. The survey (excluding the seclusion and restraint sections) is provided in Appendix A.

Demographics

The first section of the survey asked the respondent about family information and demographics. These items asked about the respondent (e.g. relationship with the child, level of education, first language, ethnicity, family income) and about the child (e.g. age, grade, gender, ethnicity, identifications/diagnoses). The participants were also asked to report on their child's 2022-2023 school information (e.g. class placement, public/private, school board).

School Exclusion

In the second section, the survey asked the respondent about the child's experiences of school exclusion. This section had items related to the child's sense of school belonging, attendance patterns and reasons for non-attendance.

Attendance and Absenteeism. Parents reported if their child attended school on a part-time or modified basis (dichotomous) and if so, for how many hours (scale from 1-2 hour/day to 5-6 hours/day) and why (open-ended response). Finally, parents provided estimates of how often their child had missed school that school year (4 point scale from "One day per month or less (10 or less days over the school year)" to "More than 1 day per week (40 or more days)" and selected reasons for these absences from a list of 6 provided reasons; parents could also choose 'other' and provide a written response (e.g. My child was reluctant or avoided school, I gave my child a day off). Parents were also asked to identify the one most common reason for absences. The survey concluded with two open-ended questions that asked parents to provide any additional insight into their children's experiences of exclusion, restraints or seclusion in 2022/2023 and previous years.

School Belonging Scale. School Belonging was measured using a 5-item scale (e.g., How often does your child enjoy attending their school?) which was created by the team. When creating this scale, we considered several measures of school belonging prior to constructing our survey. We reviewed several validated measures of school belonging that included aspects of inclusion and exclusion considered central to the aims of the project. Many of these measures, however, contained 10 or more items, which we considered too lengthy for inclusion in the broader survey, and/or few had been specifically developed to capture parent/caregiver perspectives. The reviewed measures also differed considerably in the aspects of school belonging they emphasized, including acceptance, connectedness, rejection, exclusion, joy, satisfaction, adjustment, and wellbeing. (e.g., Abubakar et al., 2015; Akar-Vural et al., 2013;

Balkis et al., 2017; Goodenow, 1993; Whiting et al., 2017). Following a review of existing surveys and items, we developed 5 school belonging items using wording similar to previously established measures (e.g., “How often does your child feel accepted by their peers at school?”). The items were designed to encompass three aspects considered significant by the study team and participant group: acceptance, exclusion, and enjoyment at school (see Questions 21, 22, 23, 31, and 32 in Appendix A). The scale showed adequate internal consistency reliability (Cronbach’s = 0.79).

Data Analysis

In accordance with the mixed methods study design, quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted concurrently and mixed at the point of findings.

Quantitative

The analytic sample consisted of participants who reported that their child had previously been identified with autism spectrum disorder ($n = 232$). As is typical of the whole sample, most respondents also identified their child with other exceptionalities including giftedness, learning disability, language impairment etc. Of the total sample, about 31% of students ($n = 71$) had only an autism spectrum disorder identification/diagnosis with 69% ($n = 161$) having autism spectrum disorder plus one or several other identifications (e.g. Developmental or Mild Intellectual Disability, Behaviour Difficulty).

To answer the first research question and to determine whether school attendance problems, demographic and school-related factors predict the school belonging of Autistic students, a multiple linear regression analysis using the method was conducted in IBM SPSS (Version 29; IBM Corp., 2022). The enter method was used as predictor variables were selected a priori based on existing literature and theoretical relevance (e.g., literature identifying absenteeism as a significant predictor of school belonging and the study’s broader grounding in the KiTeS framework) (Anderson, 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Melvin et al., 2019). This method also allows for the simultaneous examination of all selected predictors while avoiding limitations associated with stepwise approaches, such as overfitting and sample-specific model selection (Best & Wolf, 2016). The dependent variable in this study is sense of belonging to school as measured by the School Belonging Scale (mean score) and the independent variables are student grade (K-6 and 7-12), family’s income (scaled level of income), parent’s highest education attainment (scaled level of education), frequency of school absenteeism (4-point

scale), and type of class placement. School belonging items were reverse coded such that higher scores reflected more positive perceptions of school belonging and lower levels of exclusion. In addition, parents reported their child's current class placement using six educational placement categories ranging from segregated special education settings to full-time regular classroom placement. Class placement was recoded into a 5-point ordinal variable ranging from more restrictive to more inclusive educational placements. Due to conceptual similarity and relatively smaller subgroup frequencies, "special education school all of the time" and "special education class all of the time" were combined into a single category representing the most restrictive placements. Although ordinal in nature, the variable was treated as a continuous/ordinal measure in the regression analyses due to its ordered structure representing increasing levels of educational inclusion.

The independent variables in this study were selected based on prior research linking them to school belonging-related outcomes. School grade, class placement and absenteeism all influence students' sense of school belonging. Older students, those with higher absenteeism, and students in segregated or self-contained classes tend to report lower belonging (Barron et al., 2024; Neel & Fuligni, 2013; O'Hagan et al., 2024; Osborne & Reed, 2011; Preece & Howley, 2018). Not much is known about the potential relationships between school grade, class placement and sense of school belonging in Autistic students; therefore, this part of the analysis will be exploratory in nature. Descriptive statistics will be generated for all variables, and bivariate correlations will be calculated to explore relationships among predictors and to assess their suitability for regression analysis. Assumptions of linearity, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, and normality of residuals will be evaluated prior to interpretation (Tranmer et al., 2020). Interpretation will focus on the strength, direction, and significance of each predictor, using standardized coefficients and confidence intervals to identify factors most strongly associated with students' sense of belonging.

Qualitative

Qualitative data consisted of responses to two open-ended questions completed by caregivers that contained descriptions of current concerns and issues related to school-based inclusion/exclusion, restraint and seclusion for their child in 2022/2023 and previous years:

- 1) What else do you want to share with us about your experience with school-based inclusion, exclusion, restraints or seclusion for your child in 2022/2023?
- 2) What else do you want to share with us about your experience with school-based inclusion, exclusion, restraints or seclusion for your child in years other than 2022/2023?

Open-ended responses were exported from SPSS to Microsoft Excel for qualitative analysis. For each participant, the two questions above were collapsed and considered as a single textual response. This decision was made after reviewing the responses and noting the consistency of issues or examples provided by participants across the two questions and the many instances where participants did not distinguish clearly between the ‘2022/2023’ school year and previous years in their responses. Given the focus of the current study, content specifically related to seclusion and restraint was removed from the text, focusing specifically on mention of school belonging, school attendance/absenteeism, and inclusion/exclusion. Responses that contained no substantive content were removed (n=94). Responses consisting of “N/A” (n = 3) or “nothing” (n = 2) in text were subsequently excluded. Following further review, four responses were excluded as inappropriate or unrelated to the research questions. In total, 103 responses were removed from the original dataset of 232 participants, yielding a final analytic sample of 129 responses.

Conventional content analysis was applied to the final set of aggregated data (n=129) to obtain text narrative evidence provided by survey participants in the study (Stemler, 2015). The first step in the qualitative content analysis approach was to formulate the research questions and selecting the sample to be analyzed, which have been presented above (Castro et al., 2010; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The research question guiding the qualitative analysis was “What are the experiences of parents of children with autism regarding their child’s school attendance, inclusion and sense of school belonging?”. As the next step, I thoroughly read through the open-ended survey responses, immersed myself in the data and obtained a sense of the whole before generating any codes (Tesch, 1990). Then, I read the data word by word to derive codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morse & Field, 1995) by highlighting the exact words in the text that convey key thoughts or concepts. Next, I approached the text by taking notes of my first impressions, thoughts and initial analysis of the data. Following this process, I started creating

labels for codes which ultimately became the initial coding scheme. As the codes were finalized, I identified the frequency of each code and categorized them based on how they were related and linked. Related codes were then organized into categories that emerged inductively from the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Patton, 2002). The open-ended responses were analyzed for a second time using the revised code structure. Next, I developed definitions for each category. In the reporting of the findings, examples for each code and category from the data have been identified and provided (Morse & Field, 1995). Throughout the analysis process, I increased trustworthiness by frequently collaborating with my supervisor in the development of labels, codes and categories (Mayring, 2015). Additionally, my supervisor coded 22% of the final qualitative dataset (n=30) to ensure credibility of the analyses.

Mixed Methods Analysis

Once the quantitative and qualitative analysis were completed, integration of data occurred at the point of interpreting and reporting the findings. The qualitative findings provided depth and explanation for the quantitative findings. Integration of the data occurred through two approaches: integrating through data transformation and integrating through narration (Fetters et al., 2013). As mentioned above, the codes resulting from the content analysis of the qualitative data were first converted into frequency counts. While the frequency counts of the qualitative data are often mixed with the quantitative data, Fetters and colleagues (2013) report that this approach is not rigid and provide examples of studies where the transformed qualitative data has been simply compared to results obtained in the quantitative data. The current study took this direction, highlighting the similarities and differences in the qualitative and quantitative findings. Moreover, the results were interpreted at a broader analytic level through a narrative approach, employing a weaving strategy to synthesize findings. Findings were discussed as a whole, which allowed the study to highlight how the two forms of evidence converge, complement, or extend one another. The method of weaving consists of reporting the quantitative and qualitative findings together, using themes or categories to organize the data. Guiding categories were identified according to their relevance to the study's variables of interest (i.e. inclusion, sense of school belonging, absenteeism).

Results

The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses are presented to address the research questions. Findings from both strands are then integrated to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the results.

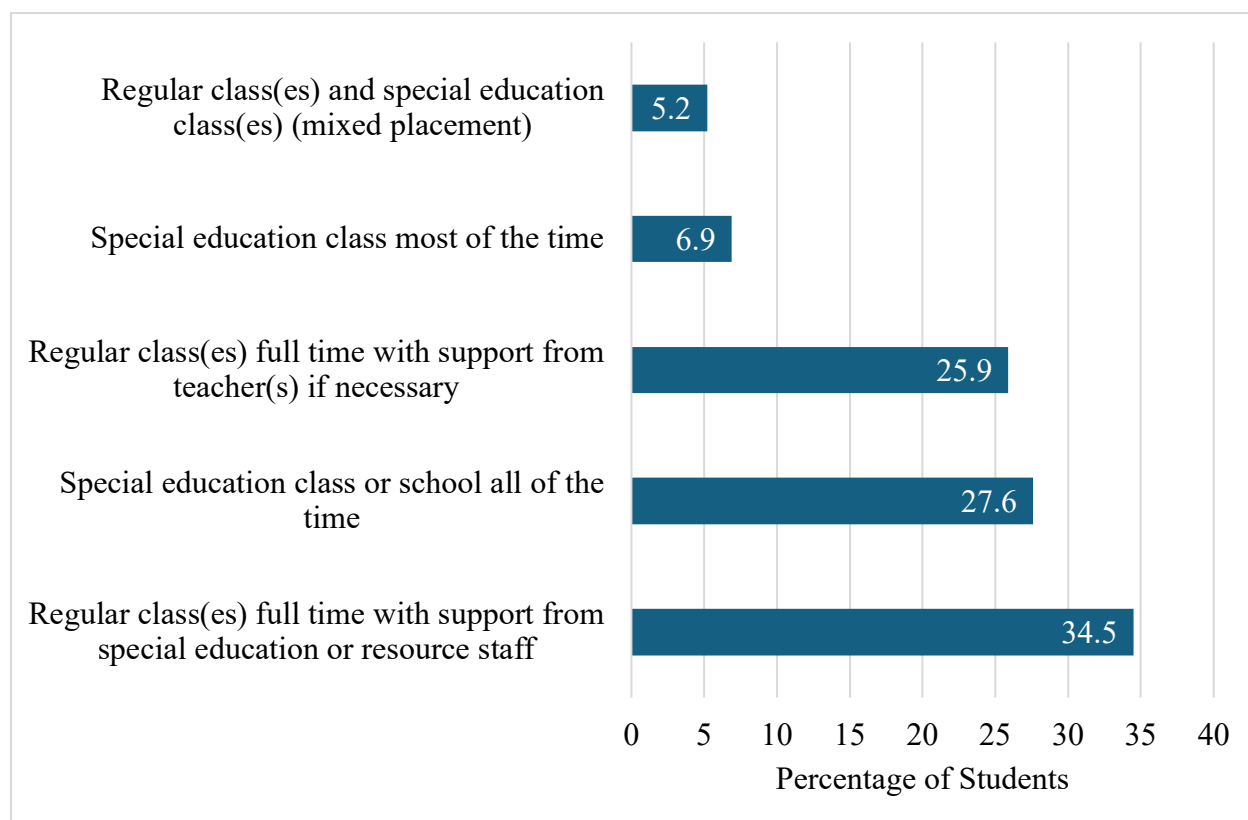
Student Demographics

The students ranged in age from 4 to 21 years with an average age of 11 ($SD = 3.96$). They ranged in grade from kindergarten to Grade 12 and a slight majority were in elementary (K-6) grades (62%). About 23% of the students were identified as female, 73% were male, 4% were gender non-conforming or transgendered. As with the parents, about 96% of the students spoke English as a first language with 3% speaking French and the rest speaking a range of first languages, including ASL/LSQ. About 96% of students were born in Canada with 87% identifying as White, 9% as First Nations, Métis or Inuit (Indigenous), 4% as Black and less than 1% East Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American and Southeast Asian, as well as “Other” responses. Approximately 13% of the sample identified as having mixed ethnicity. Most of the students (94%) attended publicly funded schools (6% attended a private school, one student was being homeschooled, and one was reported as at home full time due to exclusion). Class placements varied across participants, with most children spending the majority or all of their time in regular classrooms. Approximately 60% of children were educated full time in regular classes, either with support from special education or resource staff (35%) or with teacher support as needed (26%). In contrast, 35% of students were placed primarily in special education settings for all or most of the school day (see Figure 2). A summary of demographics of students can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2*Summary of Demographic Variables of Students*

Demographic Variable	n	%
Gender	228	
Male	166	72.8
Female	53	23.2
Other	9	3.9
First Language	232	
English	222	95.7
French	6	2.6
Other	4	1.7
Birthplace	231	
Canada	222	96.1
Outside of Canada	9	3.9
Ethnicity	232	
White	204	87.9
First Nations, Métis or Inuit	21	9.1
Black	10	4.3
Latin American	4	1.7
Mixed	30	12.9
Other	19	8.2
School Funding	232	
Publicly funded	217	93.5
Privately funded	13	5.6
Other	2	0.9

Note. Participant who selected “prefer not to say” were excluded from analyses. Percentages exceed 100 percent because participants were able to select more than one ethnic or cultural background.

Figure 2*Type of Class Placement of Students (n=232)***Quantitative Findings**

A linear regression analysis was used to test the first research question, wherein the dependent variable was the students' sense of belonging to school, while grade, type of class placement, frequency of school attendance, parents' level of education and family income were the independent variables. Prior to conducting the analyses, descriptive statistics were conducted (Table 3) and bivariate correlations were calculated between key variables to explore relationships and establish suitability for the linear regression analyses (Table 4). All variables were assessed and met the required assumptions for linearity, normality of residuals, homoscedasticity, and absence of multicollinearity. The descriptive statistics indicated moderate variation across variables, with the school belonging scale showing relatively low skewness and kurtosis, suggesting an approximately normal distribution. Missing data was treated with listwise deletion, resulting in sample size of 202.

Many significant associations emerged, with the strongest relationships being between frequency of absences, class placement and school belonging. A pronounced negative relationship emerged between frequency of school absence and school belonging, indicating that students who missed school more frequently tended to report lower levels of school belonging. School belonging also showed small but significant positive correlations with type of class placement, parent level of education, and family income, suggesting that higher socioeconomic resources and certain placement contexts were modestly associated with greater belonging. Additionally, family income was negatively correlated with school absence, indicating that students from higher-income families tended to have lower absence frequencies. A moderate negative relationship was also observed between family income and parent level of education, reflecting variation in socioeconomic characteristics within the sample.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Regression Analysis Variables

Variable	n	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Range
Frequency of School Absence	225	1.00	4.00	2.26	1.13	0.34	-1.27	3.00
School Belonging Scale	232	1.00	5.00	3.19	0.84	-0.06	-0.18	4.00
Type of Placement	232	1.00	5.00	3.24	1.58	-0.43	-1.44	4.00

Table 4

Correlations for Regression Analysis Variables

Variable	n	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Frequency of School Absence	202	2.26 (1.13)	--				
2. School Belonging	202	3.19 (0.84)	-.42**	--			
3. Type of Placement	202	3.24 (1.58)	.05	.15*	--		
4. Grade ^a	202	1.38 (0.49)	.10	-.06	.11	--	
5. Parent Level of Education	202	2.59 (0.92)	.11	.12*	-.09	.13*	--
6. Family Income	202	2.68 (1.07)	-.15*	.15*	.09	.11	-.37**

^a 1 = K-6 and 2=7-12

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The regression analysis revealed a statistically significant model, $F(5, 196) = 12.35$, $p < .001$, with an adjusted R^2 of .22 (Table 5). Variables that added significantly to the prediction

included frequency of school absence, which was moderately and negatively associated with school belonging ($r = -.42, p < .01$), and class placement, which showed a small positive association with school belonging ($r = .15, p < .05$). Parent education approached but did not meet statistical significance ($p = .098$). School grade and family income were not significantly related to students' sense of belonging to school. Overall, the results indicate that students who experienced lower levels of school absence and more inclusive class placements reported a greater sense of belonging to school.

Table 5

Multiple Linear Regression Predicting School Belonging

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI
Intercept	3.719	0.289	—	12.884	< .001	[3.150, 4.288]
Grade	-0.059	0.109	-.035	-0.545	.586	[-0.274, 0.156]
Type of Placement	0.088	0.034	.168	2.598	.010	[0.021, 0.155]
Parent Level of Education	-0.103	0.062	-.115	-1.661	.098	[-0.226, 0.019]
Family Income	0.076	0.054	.100	1.422	.157	[-0.030, 0.183]
Frequency of School Absence	-0.302	0.048	-.401	-6.309	< .001	[-0.396, -0.208]

Note. $N = 202$. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; SE = standard error; β = standardized regression coefficient; CI = confidence interval.

Qualitative Findings

Following the content analysis, I identified four major categories of findings relating to the perceptions of parents of Autistic children regarding their child's school experiences around exclusion, school attendance problems and sense of school belonging. These four categories capture the availability of supports and resources, academic and social exclusion, and broader

relationships such as the home-school collaboration. Descriptive frequency language was used to convey the relative prominence of themes across participant accounts. Terms such as “frequently,” “many,” or “numerous” reflected themes that recurred across multiple participant responses, whereas terms such as “some” or “a small number” reflected themes identified less consistently across accounts. The themes are described in a linear format; however, as they are often intertwined and influence one another, multiple themes may have been experienced by a child or family. Emerging themes and subthemes as well as examples with direct quotes are described within each of these broad categories (see Table 6).

Table 6*Example Open-Ended Responses with Corresponding Categories*

Category	Examples (Direct Quotes)
Educational Supports, Staffing and Institutional Capacity	• Child's educational needs as outlined in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) are not met due to the lack of available staff at the school. • The EAs need more training, and the teachers and resource teachers need specific training on autism. • There is not enough EA support in schools, leading to my child not receiving the proper support to participate in class. • I pulled my child out of public school in grade 4 due to inadequate support for her disabilities. Her behavior and regulation were becoming increasingly out of control and it was almost completely due to the inadequate support she was receiving.
School-Based Exclusion Limiting Educational Access	• When he wasn't segregated, he was sent home (almost every single day from Junior Kindergarten until he left the public school system). • Had to advocate every single year for IEP to be followed. Regularly called to pick child up because their needs were not being met.
Social Exclusion and Student Wellbeing	• Bullying from other kids and even some teachers. • We have always been in this situation where our child is unhappy at school but not so unhappy that there are major issues.
Home-School Dynamics and Family Impacts	• I have lost my job, as a single parent with only my own. This has caused great amounts of undue hardship. • Child struggled with school refusal because needs were not met and accommodations not followed. School has caused significant trauma to my child and family. • We do not receive enough information when our child is having a rough time and what they have implemented, nor do we feel welcome in the school to assist.

Educational Supports, Staffing and Institutional Capacity

This category captures parents' observations of educational supports and staffing, with particular attention to how inadequacies in these areas served as barriers to inclusion for their Autistic children. Many participants described how "inadequate support" emerged within the school environment and the different ways in which their child was affected. One participant reflected, "I pulled my child out of public school in Grade 4 due to inadequate support for her disabilities. Her behaviour and regulation were becoming increasingly out of control, and it was almost completely due to the inadequate support she was receiving". One parent's concise response that "[my] child needs more support, check-ins and accommodations." captured a significant portion of parents' accounts of their children's experiences. Another parent reported that their child "has had a very successful year due to the level of support being received" but expressed concern that support was reduced once progress was observed and that requests for help were not provided until the child was in crisis. A considerable number of parents expressed the view that their Autistic children required a broad range of individualized educational, social, and therapeutic supports to succeed in school, and reported that such supports were largely unavailable, insufficient or absent within their school contexts. For instance, one participant reported that "schools do not have enough support for kids with special needs. The school keeps asking for more supports to help students but are declined the extra support. This affects students and in turn can cause unwanted behaviour due to support needs not being met". Several parents indicated that they moved their child to a private high school, changing school boards in an effort to address inadequate supports within the public school system. Other participants touched upon the direct impact of lack of supports on the child and the families, describing how it led to missed learning opportunities and social events in and out of school as well as parents needing to advocate for inclusion.

The second most recurring concern under educational supports and staffing was regarding Educational Assistants (EAs) within the school context, with many participants expressing concern over the lack of availability and access to EAs. One parent shared their concerns by stating "we need more EA's and supports in schools. The teachers and staff do the best they can, but in order to avoid them getting burnt out, they need the assistance". Parents described systemic failures in delivering promised diverse resources including EA support, emphasizing that shared and insufficient staffing limited individualized assistance and effectively

contributed to their children's exclusion within mainstream classrooms. Aligned with this, many parents indicated that their child was adversely affected by the absence of one-to-one EA support. For example, one parent described:

My child went through K-6 with no EA support; teachers can only provide so much one on one with 25-40 kids in a mainstream class. This is exclusion, my child didn't have negative behaviour, so he wasn't allowed the resources to learn. (He) missed basic academic skills, no social skills taught, at 16 still has not one friend. Now he is still in mainstream classes with indirect support, there are even less staff for support in high school. He needs 1-on-1 and can be successful.

Many parents expressed the scarcity of EAs in schools and disproportion of the number of support staff to students in need of support. For example, one parent reported that their child's school "had 2 EAs for more than 1000 students." Similarly, another participant described how their child required one-to-one EA support but was expected to attend mainstream classes without it, noting that this removed their child's sense of safety and set them up for failure. A minority of the parents highlighted how EAs often lack specialized training in autism-specific learning needs, which may limit the effectiveness of the support provided as requirements differ from those associated with other disabilities. A small number of parents pointed to broader systemic issues, particularly insufficient funding for EAs and autism support staff. As one parent noted "the front-line staff try so hard to make integration work, but the system is inapt and poorly funded". Overall, parents emphasized that inadequate staffing and support contributed to experiences of exclusion, as reflected in their observations of how their Autistic children struggled to access individualized assistance within mainstream settings.

Parents' accounts also strongly reflected systemic limitations in institutional capacity, particularly in relation to the availability of instructional resources, staffing adequacy and training to support Autistic students. The depth of disability-focused training received by staff and the sufficiency of staffing to assist Autistic children emerged as the two most frequently recurring concerns raised by parents. One parent reflected:

There just isn't enough staff and or resources for all involved and that is a basic right, the right to safe and equitable education with the right supports. And that starts with having appropriate staffing ratios. As well as having enough staff trained on first aid and responding to incidents quickly, with the appropriate knowledge.

Many parents described how the lack of training in autism-specific interventions and the limited availability of resources often operated together, resulting in inconsistent support, unmet accommodations, and a reliance on reactive rather than proactive approaches within schools.

Illustrating this, one parent expressed their concern:

The lack of supports in my child's current placement saw no safe outdoor or indoor spaces, no safe movement rooms, and lack of neurodiverse affirming programming. The staff lack this training and knowledge as well; the environments are not built to have sensory based learning. Strategies employed in schools are compliance based and not neurodiverse affirming. ...We need autism trained individuals to be working with neurodivergent learners - very different from those who are differently physically abled”.

Moreover, several parents noted that misunderstandings related to autism and associated needs often affected how accommodations were understood and applied, effectively excluding Autistic children from meaningful access to learning and instruction appropriately adapted to their learning profiles. For instance, one participant expressed:

Part of my child’s IEP is frequent check ins, nobody noticed he was not attending to school... and that he had 90 outstanding assignments. I brought this history to the attention of school, and they commented on his report card that my kid missed content because he wore noise canceling headphones - these are a support accommodation allowed in his IEP. My kid was in the classroom but excluded from an education due to lack of support/teacher understanding of autism.

Parents also described staffing limitations as embedded within the broader educational infrastructure rather than attributable to individual staff members. Reflections included these concerns as often appearing across multiple aspects of their children’s schooling experiences:

There are often not enough resources allocated towards the placement of teacher's aids within the school system. Even at recess, there is a high prevalence of injuries occurring on the school yard because there are not enough staff monitoring the children. ...Where is the funding? Overall, the entire way the schools are funded, and the lack of staffing is negatively impacting all the kids that are just trying to learn and play safely.

One parent’s concern touched upon the lack of understanding of what inclusion really implies for Autistic children, expressing “parents don't want Special Education classrooms eliminated because they're afraid their kids won't get the proper supports in a regular classroom”.

In summary, parents' accounts underscored how persistent gaps in educational supports, staffing capacity and autism-affirming training limited schools' ability to provide consistent and individualized support, contributing to exclusion experiences for Autistic students.

School-Based Exclusion Limiting Educational Access

The second category that emerged was school-based exclusion limiting Autistic students' educational access, centering on restricted attendance, partial participation, and inconsistent implementation of supports necessary for meaningful participation in the curriculum. Sub-themes related to how these forms of exclusion reduced students' ability to experience inclusivity and fully access learning opportunities within school were detailed across accounts. The most prominently described concern was related to Autistic children's access to education being limited through reduced or disrupted attendance. These included partial or modified school days, school-imposed attendance restrictions, and instances of withdrawal. Parents distinguished between school-imposed attendance restrictions and instances in which they withdrew their child, noting that reduced attendance was most often driven by school-related factors. One parent described:

I am constantly getting phone calls to pick my child up early because his behaviour "isn't safe". I also had to keep him home for four days so they could develop a safety and behaviour plan. And now he can only go to school in the mornings. I've had constant phone calls, emails, and messages regarding my child and everything negative about him, especially his behaviour. I've requested multiple meetings, arranged to pay to have professional help come into the school and the school wouldn't do it. Their constant answer is me to constantly pick up my child when his behaviour is too much for them to handle.

Many responses underscored that this form of school exclusion significantly reduced instructional time and consistent learning. Indicating that modified attendance was associated not only with academic drawbacks but also with reduced connection to the school, one parent reported "when attendance is bad, it is because [the children] don't want to go to school because of how they are being treated. It's very frustrating!". Furthermore, parents whose responses were captured by this theme also described the challenge of Autistic students' exclusion from specific academic and extracurricular activities. Numerous respondents reported that their children were excluded from classroom activities, group work, or school events such as field trips, restricting

opportunities for both academic participation and broader educational experiences. Emerging within this concern, parents often described a systemic practice of conditional participation, where Autistic students' access to activities such as field trips was contingent on parental presence. A respondent illustrated:

My child was not directly excluded; however, there were two field trips and I felt obligated to go on these trips as I did not feel confident in the school's ability to monitor my child off the school grounds. On the second trip the learners were divided into groups and my child and I were separated into our own "group" with no other classmates. He definitely felt excluded at this time.

In some cases, parents described exclusion as embedded within program structures, with one parent stating:

It is hard to write that my child is excluded when he is in a special education class full time and they don't do field trips or any activities. They don't eat in the cafeteria with the mainstream kids or even with the other special education classes. They are in their classroom all day.

In addition, failures in the implementation of individualized supports were frequently identified as a key barrier to educational access. Even when supports were formally outlined, such as through IEPs, parents described inconsistencies in how these accommodations were applied, limiting their child's ability to meaningfully engage with the curriculum. Many respondents addressed the issue of IEPs remaining no more than a paper rather than a long-term support plan, with one caregiver stating:

"Even with a diagnosis, an IEP, and support from an EA, teachers seem to ignore this and act as though [my children] do not need extra help. Some have said they do not think [my children] have autism. I am always having to fight with them to follow the IEP. As a result, [my child] gets ignored and cannot complete the work".

Parents described these exclusions as embedded within routine school practices, with decisions around attendance, placement, and participation significantly limiting access to instruction and reflecting broader structural barriers to inclusive education. Reduced attendance, missed instructional time, and inconsistent supports were marked as contributing to gaps in learning and limiting overall educational progress. Collectively, these accounts illustrate how

multiple forms of school-based exclusion limited students' access to curriculum and participation, shaping their overall educational experiences.

Social Exclusion and Student Wellbeing

This category encompasses parents' accounts of social exclusion experienced by their Autistic children within school environments, including exclusionary practices by staff, peer bullying, and limited opportunities for meaningful social participation. Parents frequently described how these experiences contributed to their child's feelings of isolation and diminished belonging within the school community. The most frequently recurring concerns raised by parents in this category pertained to exclusion occurring through everyday school practices and decisions made by staff. These practices included limiting participation in classroom activities or school events, placing students in segregated spaces beyond their needs, or structuring learning environments in ways that reduced opportunities for peer engagement. One parent reported:

My son has never felt like he was accepted or that the staff have his back, and I can see that is where all the behaviour has come from. Although he gets up and goes to school every day, I can see the staff have an ableist attitude, and because of his disability related behaviour there is stigma attached to his attendance. [He has been] subject to bullying for the past seven years and his reaction/response to the triggers always caused him to be blamed.

Peer bullying and exclusion from classmates emerged as a recurring concern across parents' accounts. Many parents reported that their children were often verbally or physically targeted by peers, left out of social interactions, or struggled to establish friendships contributing to ongoing experiences of social marginalization within the school environment. Several respondents identified staff and the school's failure to address and intervene in peer bullying as an overarching issue, with one reflecting:

He faced awful bullying due to how adults treated him and children reflecting that. It was not dealt with. It even turned violent where kids were going by our house and uttering death threats, smashed our window, and my son could not play outside. The school was making my son eat on the floor alone in the hall. The rest of his day was excluded in a room on an iPad mostly unsupervised where he was able to access scary or inappropriate content.

Moreover, parents frequently reported social isolation experienced by their children, linking them to limited opportunities for peer engagement, insufficient supports for social participation, or environments that did not adequately accommodate their child's social and communication needs. Highlighting a broader pattern, a considerable number of parents connected these exclusionary experiences to a diminished sense of belonging to school for their children. As one parent described, "[the school environment] is challenging for those who need support and encouragement with engaging socially, thereby inhibiting a sense of community/belonging". Parents described how repeated experiences of being left out, misunderstood, or unsupported within classroom settings contributed to feelings of isolation and difficulty developing meaningful social connections at school. Across accounts, parents also discussed how these experiences of exclusion affected their child's wellbeing. Reports included emotional and behavioural distress, anxiety, reduced self-esteem, school engagement issues and additional adverse mental health outcomes (e.g. trauma, self-harm), suggesting that persistent social exclusion may have broader implications for students' mental health and school engagement. In the words of one parent, "the failure of the school to address bullying/harassment led to a break-down from which she is still recovering". Collectively, these accounts demonstrate how social exclusion within school settings, shaped by staff practices, peer dynamics, and limited opportunities for participation, contributed to isolation, adverse mental health impacts, and a reduced sense of school belonging among autistic students.

Home-School Dynamics and Family Impacts

The final category captures the relationships and dynamics between the child, family and school as well as the impacts of systemic limitations and their child's experiences of social and academic exclusion on families themselves. Emerging concerns ranged from a parent's own feelings of exhaustion from constantly pushing for their child's inclusion to parents' worries for their child's ability to participate in social opportunities and feel connected to others at school. Illustrating this, one parent reported:

I had to advocate every single year for [the] IEP to be followed. I was regularly called to pick child up because their needs were not being met. Child struggled with school refusal because needs were not met and accommodations not followed. School has caused significant trauma to my child and family.

Respondents' most prominently referenced pattern in this category was insufficient and inconsistent communication from schools to families. Parents reported long-lasting emotional stress, scheduling burdens, and disruptions to family functioning as attempts to compensate for gaps in school-based coordination and support. A recurring concern across accounts involved learning about academic, behavioural, or attendance concerns only once they had become severe. One parent described:

We had little to no communication with the teacher or principal about this or anything this year. We were told they didn't have time for this communication. Our child was to be included in regular classes to begin integration. When the school was questioned about this, we were told that he integrates at recess. We did not find this acceptable and went against his IEP. There was no resolution made.

Several parents of Autistic children also described their child's school-related challenges as generating significant financial, emotional and psychological strain (Table 6). Families reported reducing work hours, leaving employment, or incurring additional expenses (e.g., changing the child's enrollment from the public school system to a private school) in addition to enduring emotional impacts of their child's lack of social belonging and academic inclusivity. Describing how critical and impactful gaps in school-home collaboration can be, one participant expressed:

We were forced to go half days, or Family and Children's Services (FACS) would be called on us, even in the years he was in a low enrollment Special Education class. [School] threatened that FACS would be called if no one was home to get him off the bus at noon, even though we did not agree to half days because we had to work. The notice was given on a Friday for a Monday start. Ever since 2017, we have been called to pick him up early multiple times per week.

In addition to describing familial challenges, parents also noted significant effects of school-related exclusion on their child's emotional well-being, including increased anxiety, social isolation, and distress connected to their school experiences. One parent indicated:

He has suffered trauma from attending his previous school. He has pulled out all of his eyebrows and is not the same kid he was last year. I have been on a stress leave since January. The stress of having to constantly advocate and the gaslighting by the school has caused my own health to be compromised.

Taken together, concerns about systemic accountability were embedded within parents' descriptions of home–school interactions. It was widely perceived by parents that responsibility for addressing concerns regarding Autistic students' academic and social exclusion was frequently shifted between educators, administrators, and school board. A significant number of participants framed inadequate communication and collaboration as structural problems within the education system and called upon improvements in school-home dynamics. Overall, school-family interactions built upon poor collaboration, inadequate communication and shortcomings in accountability significantly added to familial burden.

Mixing of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

This section brings together the quantitative and qualitative findings through a narrative, weaving approach to integration. This allows for comparison of patterns across both strands of data and providing a more comprehensive understanding of factors influencing school belonging among Autistic students.

Overall, both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that Autistic students' sense of school belonging is influenced by a myriad of factors. Quantitative findings demonstrate that Autistic students' sense of school belonging was, on average, moderate (see Table 3). In contrast, qualitative findings revealed that parents often described their children's sense of belonging as low or absent. While the weaving approach was appropriate for the broader single-sample mixed methods design, some integration involved drawing from both the full quantitative sample ($n=232$) and the qualitative sub-sample of participants who provided open-ended responses ($n=129$). It is possible that parents who chose to provide more detailed qualitative accounts may have held more salient or negative experiences related to school belonging, attendance, or exclusion. However, comparison of school belonging scores between the qualitative sub-sample ($M = 3.15$) and the overall study sample ($M = 3.19$) suggested relatively similar patterns across groups, supporting the appropriateness of integrating findings across both datasets. Accounts were consistently linked with experiences of social exclusion, including isolation, peer bullying, and restricted opportunities for meaningful participation in the school environment. This contrast suggests that students' sense of belonging may not be uniformly experienced, with moderate overall scores potentially masking more negative, context-specific experiences described by parents. Taken together, these findings suggest that school belonging is shaped by students'

experiences of inclusion, integration and participation within daily school interactions, which are not fully captured by overall quantitative measures.

With respect to family and demographics factors, the quantitative findings showed that parental level of education and family income were significantly correlated with students' sense of belonging, although these variables did have significant associations with school belonging in the regression model (see Table 4). Throughout the qualitative findings, families described the reciprocal influence of home and family factors and the school belonging experiences of their child. Parents reported a range of impacts associated with their child's school experiences, including financial strain, disruptions to employment, ongoing advocacy demands, emotional burden, and a perceived lack of school-based communication, collaboration and systemic accountability. These findings expand upon the quantitative results, suggesting that while socioeconomic factors may not directly predict students' sense of belonging, they shape families' capacity to navigate school systems, advocate for supports, and respond to exclusion.

Looking at school-related factors, class placement emerged as a significant variable in the correlation and regression analysis, albeit making a modest contribution to variance. Students who were educated in more segregated/less inclusive placements were perceived by their parents as having a lower sense of school belonging. On the other hand, grade was not significantly associated with belonging in either the correlation or regression analyses, suggesting that school belonging was not affected by whether students were in younger or older grades. In the qualitative findings, participants did not focus frequently on specific placements or grade but described at length the exclusionary practices, both academic and social, that their child experienced in their school and the impact this had on their sense of belonging. These included limited access to group and class activities, inconsistent and insufficient support, and restricted opportunities for social participation and integration, all of which furthered Autistic students' experiences of exclusion and lowered belonging. For class placement, the findings taken together suggest that although placement showed a modest statistical association with school belonging, qualitative accounts indicate that it is the everyday academic and social practices within these placements that appear to shape students' experiences of inclusion and belonging.

In the quantitative findings, absenteeism had the most significant association with sense of school belonging and revealed a strong relationship between students feeling accepted and included at school, and the frequency with which they attended. Many parents clearly outlined

the connection between their child's school attendance and their experiences within the school environment. Rather than occurring in isolation and being detached from the school context, Autistic students' absenteeism patterns were frequently described as a response to unmet needs, exclusionary practices, and negative school experiences. Specifically, families described how factors such as lack of support, social exclusion, and inadequate implementation of accommodations contributed to school avoidance, modified attendance, or withdrawal from school altogether. In many cases, accounts highlighted that reduced/modified attendance was driven by school-based decisions and institutional practices, as opposed to solely reflecting independent student behaviour or family decision. In relation to attendance, both the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that absenteeism both reflects and reinforces students' school experiences and sense of belonging. They also highlight the ways in which exclusionary practices, systemic capacities and institutional decisions influence students' capacity to attend and feel connected to school.

Overall, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings highlights that students' sense of school belonging is shaped by a complex interplay of school-related and family-level factors. While quantitative results identified key associations with attendance and class placement, qualitative findings revealed that these relationships are grounded in students' everyday experiences of inclusion and exclusion within school environments. Across the findings, exclusionary practices, limited supports, and school-based decisions emerged as central influences on both attendance and belonging. Collectively, school belonging appears to be shaped not only by individual or demographic characteristics, but also by the relational and systemic contexts within which families and schools interact.

Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to examine how family and school-related factors influence the sense of school belonging among Autistic students in K–12 settings. Specifically, this study sought to determine the extent to which absenteeism, demographic characteristics (i.e., family income, parent level of education), and school-related factors (i.e., grade, class placement) are associated with students' sense of belonging. Furthermore, it explored parents' perceptions of their child's inclusion, exclusion and belonging. Given the importance of school belonging for students' academic and social development, understanding how these factors interact is critical for supporting inclusive educational environments. First, I will discuss how the

current findings align with, extend, or differ from existing literature on school belonging, absenteeism, and inclusion among Autistic students. Then, I will provide potential interpretations of these findings on a deeper level, by considering how school and family factors jointly influence students' experiences. The contextualization of these relationships will be done through drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and the KiTeS framework (Melvin et al., 2019). Although the findings are discussed in a linear manner, it is important to recognize the complex interconnected ways in which the variables examined operate and how they are situated within broader contexts. Interpreted through the experiences of Autistic students and their families, the findings highlight how factors such as school attendance, class placement, and socioeconomic context are interconnected with students' experiences of inclusion and sense of school belonging. While this study focused on specific demographic and school-related variables, it is important to acknowledge that other factors not examined, such as the nature and intensity of students' support needs (Osborne & Reed, 2011) may also influence school belonging and the experiences reported by families.

Sense of Belonging to School

The findings of this study indicate that Autistic students' sense of school belonging was affected by various and interacting contextual factors. The mean score on the School Belonging Scale was around the midpoint with a standard deviation of .84, indicating a range of experiences and an overall report of 'somewhat' experiencing a sense of school belonging. However, the many negative descriptions provided in the qualitative accounts suggested that school belonging was often experienced as limited or absent. The variance in the quantitative and qualitative findings may suggest that school belonging is rather a reflection of students' everyday experiences of inclusion, participation, and support within the school environment than a constant individual perception. Existing literature indicates that Autistic students frequently report lower levels of school belonging compared to their peers (Bailey et al., 2020; Hebron, 2018; Osborne & Reed, 2011). Parents described how their children's sense of school belonging was molded by their daily school experiences. Inclusion and exclusion being at the core, the outlined experiences ranged from relational processes such as social exclusion and limited participation in classroom and school activities, to broader systemic factors such as inconsistent or insufficient supports. This finding aligns with previous conceptualizations of sense of school

belonging, which emphasize students' perceptions of being accepted, supported, and included within the school environment (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Libbey, 2004).

A prominent factor shaping Autistic students' school belonging in this study was their experience of social inclusion/exclusion within the school environment. Several participants voiced concerns pertaining to autism-related stigma enacted by both peers and school staff, leading to significant social barriers; similar dynamics have been reported in prior research (Nistor & Dumitru, 2021; Williams et al., 2019). Difficulties forming and maintaining peer relationships, along with experiences of exclusion from social interactions, were frequently described and appeared to undermine students' sense of connection to the school environment. A plethora of other studies point to Autistic students being at higher risk of social isolation and peer exclusion, which have been shown to negatively affect their sense of school belonging (Carrington et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2021; Hebron, 2018; Horgan et al., 2023). In particular, verbal and physical targeting by peers, as well as bullying victimization, have been shown to significantly reduce K-12 students' sense of connectedness to their school, which the findings of this study echoed (Cunningham, 2007; Holt & Espelage, 2003). This link is expected given that school belonging is also defined by students' feelings of peer acceptance, as was reflected in the study's belonging variables used to define this typology.

Beyond peer relationships, previous research suggests that students' access to meaningful participation within classroom and school activities are important factors shaping school belonging (Finn, 1989; St-Amand & Smith, 2017). This was the case in the current study. Parents described how students were frequently excluded from group work, classroom engagement, and extracurricular opportunities. These exclusionary experiences appeared to limit students' ability to actively participate and engage with both academic content and peers. Various forms of conditional participation were also reported (e.g., requiring parental presence for field trips), which appeared to restrict students' independence and reinforce their difference from peers. These patterns suggest that belonging was shaped not simply by being present at school, but by being able to participate on equal terms and as an included member of the school community. Access to meaningful participation is a critical factor shaping Autistic students' experiences of inclusion and connection within school settings (Abraham, 2025; Hodges et al., 2020). Existing research indicates that participation in academic and extracurricular activities is positively associated with school belonging and student engagement (Blomfield & Barber, 2009;

Knifsend & Graham, 2012). Indeed, students who feel accepted, valued, and included by peers and teachers are more likely to participate in class discussions and collaborative learning activities (Abraham, 2025).

In terms of broader school-related and systemic factors, parents also expressed concerns about the lack of supports available at school as contributing to their child's reduced integration to their academic and social environment. Research on macro-level systems has similarly highlighted persistent challenges within school systems in adequately supporting Autistic students (Anderson, 2021). Parents' accounts from the current study detailed what they believed to be insufficient school-based understanding regarding specific disability needs of autism, insufficient qualified staff able to provide necessary supports, and difficulties accessing appropriate accommodations and inclusive pedagogical approaches (Hasson et al., 2024; Kurth et al., 2020; Starr & Foy, 2012). These broader systemic limitations can lead to inadequate or insufficient responses to Autistic students' needs, which can perpetuate patterns of exclusion from academic and social participation, as well as adverse mental health outcomes and behaviour (Brede et al., 2017). In turn, this may contribute to reduced school belonging and broader disengagement from the school environment.

The psychological, emotional and behavioural consequences of Autistic students' experiences of exclusion within the school environment were evident across accounts. The present findings align with previous existing studies underscoring the detrimental effects of reduced school belonging among Autistic children, including increased behavioural and emotional distress, and declines in overall well-being. Parents discussed at length the implications of school-related exclusion on their child's emotional well-being, including increased stress, anxiety, social isolation, and distress connected to their school experiences (Chapman et al., 2013; Shochet et al., 2006; Shochet et al., 2021; Shochet et al., 2022). Autistic students as a population are statistically among those most likely to experience academic and social difficulties in and out of school, and to experience financial and health challenges into adulthood (Posar & Visconti, 2019; van Schalkwyk & Volkmar, 2017). That they are not feeling as a connected member of their school is of major concern in relation to their short- and long-term wellbeing in multiple domains. Although research looking at school belonging in relation to family variables is scarce, the study's results in relation to family experiences is in line with existing evidence, which has shown that school-related challenges can have negative and

reciprocal impacts on families with Autistic children (Trew, 2024). In the present study, parents described how ongoing difficulties in securing appropriate supports and navigating school responses contributed to increased emotional strain and advocacy demands, while also extending into their child's disengagement and sense of connectedness within the school environment. These insights suggest the need for school environments that actively support inclusive participation, responsive practices, and meaningful relationships to foster a stronger sense of belonging among Autistic students.

Family/Demographic Factors

The current study also sought to examine whether family and demographic factors of K-12 Autistic students were related to school belonging. Parent education level and family income were not found to have significant associations with Autistic students' sense of school belonging in the regression analyses. This pattern may be explained by the characteristics of the study sample, which was somewhat limited in its demographic representation of the broader Ontario population and generally reflected higher levels of education and access to resources (e.g. English or French level, access to technology). However, there was still a meaningful range with respect to income, with approximately half of the sample reporting household incomes at or below the low-income threshold (i.e. \$56,724 for a family of four living in a large city according to Statistics Canada) (Statistics Canada, 2023), while 49.7% reported annual household incomes above \$60,000. As such, the limited predictive role of income and parent education may reflect the sample's restricted socioeconomic range overall, while also suggesting that the stronger influence of socioeconomic status on belonging is not seen until lower income levels or with a broader socioeconomic range within the sample. Future research could include families with more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, for a better test of the extent to which these family-related factors play a role in facilitating autistic youths' school engagement, inclusion and belonging.

Qualitative findings presented a different picture from parents' accounts of socioeconomic factors. Respondents described substantial financial strain, employment disruptions, and ongoing advocacy demands associated with their child's school experiences. These accounts suggest that socioeconomic pressures shape not only families' financial circumstances, but also their capacity to engage in school-related processes and advocate for their child's inclusion. One possible explanation for this pattern is that families with greater

socioeconomic resources may have more capacity to engage in school-related matters, such as advocating for their child's inclusion, rather than focusing primarily on more immediate needs (e.g., food, housing). Parents of Autistic children who perceived themselves as having greater financial resources reported higher levels of home- and school-based family involvement (Santiago et al., 2022). Conversely, the ongoing need to advocate for their child's inclusion may add to the mental and emotional burden of families who are simultaneously navigating multiple, interconnected microsystems.

The role of socioeconomic factors in shaping school belonging among Autistic students remains relatively underexplored in the existing literature. Research has mostly focused on the general student population, with many studies reporting that students with families of lower socioeconomic status tend to report a weaker sense of belonging compared to their higher socioeconomic peers (Allen et al., 2022; Cemalcilar, 2010; De Bortoli, 2018). Lower socioeconomic status has been linked to heightened perceptions of neighbourhood safety concerns (Meyer et al., 2014) and students who perceive their neighbourhoods as less safe tend to have a lower sense of school belonging (Garcia-Reid, 2007). Previous research has also examined Autistic students' school connectedness during key transitional periods, with reports of mixed findings emerging. A 2015 study found no significant differences in school belonging based on socioeconomic status transitioning from primary to secondary school (Vaz et al., 2015), whereas parent education was found to be the strongest predictor of improved school belonging after a school transition in another recent study (Whelan et al., 2024). Li et al. (2024) reported parents' education level did not significantly contribute to predicting school participation among Autistic youths in a regression model which simultaneously analyzed other youth, family, and school factors (e.g. child age and autistic traits, parental self-efficacy). It is important to note that such findings may be context-specific and may not capture the broader, indirect ways in which socioeconomic factors shape students' school experiences.

Overall, these findings suggest that family-related socioeconomic factors may not directly influence students' sense of belonging, but instead operate through more indirect pathways, shaping how families are able to respond to and navigate school-based challenges.

School-Related Factors

The present study also examined whether school-related factors, including grade level and class placement, were associated with students' sense of school belonging. Grade level was

not a significant factor in predicting Autistic students' school belonging. Qualitative accounts also did not focus on specific grade levels, a pattern observed across responses spanning two academic years. Rather, participants emphasized the exclusionary practices within school environments that influenced their child's sense of inclusion and belonging. Autistic students' school belonging may be less dependent on developmental stage or grade level, and more strongly shaped by the quality of their interactions and experiences within the school context. Existing research has mostly focused on whether age or grade is a predictor of school belonging for the general student population. In contrast to the current findings, multiple studies looking at the belonging experiences of elementary and middle school students report higher belonging levels in lower grades (Anderman, 2003; Ma, 2003; Sari, 2012). Ma (2003) attributes the decline in school belonging to the transition to secondary education, particularly the period immediately following the move from primary school when students transition from childhood to adolescence and begin forming attachment to their new school environment. Longitudinal research among high school students indicates belonging changing over time and differing by gender, with girls' belonging declining across adolescence while boys' remains relatively stable (Neel & Fuligni, 2013).

Research looking at Autistic students' belonging experiences in relation to grade is scarce and has mostly examined the trajectory of school belonging during transition from primary to secondary school as it may be particularly relevant for this student population. Older Autistic students in mainstream secondary settings tended to express stronger feelings of belonging, potentially due to longer exposure to the school environment (Osborne & Reed, 2011). Highlighting the role of school transitions and the broader school environment in shaping Autistic students' sense of belonging, research work by Hebron (2017, 2018) indicates that successful transitions and inclusive school experiences are important for fostering belonging. Overall, these findings indicate that grade level plays a limited role in shaping Autistic students' sense of school belonging.

In contrast to grade level, class placement appeared to play a more meaningful, though modest, role in shaping students' sense of school belonging. Parents whose children were educated in more segregated or less inclusive placements reported them as having a lower sense of school belonging. Although more inclusive class placements were associated with higher school belonging, this relationship should be interpreted cautiously. Because autism severity and

support needs were not measured, class placement may reflect underlying differences in student support needs rather than the independent effect of placement itself. This is due to students with more intensive needs being more likely to be educated in segregated settings (Kurth et al., 2025). Consequently, the observed association cannot be interpreted as evidence that placement alone influences school belonging. Qualitative accounts offered a more nuanced understanding of how the structure of the learning environment may influence students' connection to school relationship. Instead of class placement, respondents emphasized and shared numerous examples of everyday school practices within these settings, including limited participation in classroom activities, inconsistent supports, and restricted opportunities for social integration. Across accounts, a clear expectation emerged from families: schools should foster more inclusive and affirming classroom climates, strengthen adult–student relationships, more consistently implement responsive approaches to sensory and learning needs as well as individualized supports. This suggests that the influence of class placement on school belonging may be less about the placement itself, and more about the nature of students' day-to-day experiences within these educational contexts.

Despite some variability across studies, research shows that segregated or restrictive settings are associated with poorer peer acceptance, social integration and academic self-perceptions for students with complex support needs and/or disabilities (Barron et al., 2024; Finnvold & Dokken, 2024). As Mansouri et al. (2022) indicate in their systematic review, students in more inclusive educational settings tend to experience stronger social and academic outcomes, as well as school engagement and belonging. The current study's findings are aligned with these previous studies and suggest that the relationship between class placement and belonging is less a function of placement type itself, and more closely tied to the extent to which inclusive practices are enacted within these settings. In this regard, opportunities for meaningful participation in classroom and school activities appear to be a particularly important dimension of inclusive practice. Previous belonging-related literature has identified fostering inclusion through an accepting and affirming classroom climate and school culture. Integrating students into classroom activities, employing scaffolding and repetition, as well as engaging them in group work, fun activities, and incentives were identified as key teacher strategies for promoting acceptance and belonging among students with special educational needs (Alesech & Nayar, 2021). Teachers' and support staff's awareness and monitoring of special needs/disabilities are at

the core of inclusive practices, with evidence suggesting Autistic students have a greater opportunity to experience a sense of belonging and feel part of their classroom community when staff address sensory sensitivities (Turner, 2018, p. 30). As previously mentioned, social integration and peer acceptance have also been consistently identified as key contributors to forming school belonging for Autistic students (Atkinson et al., 2025). In addition to peer dynamics, for both students with and without disabilities, adult-student relationships were more strongly associated with school belonging than peer connections (Allen, Kern, et al., 2018; Booker, 2007; Shogren et al., 2015). Research indicates that students with disabilities feel more supported and safer at school when they have positive relationships with teachers, especially those who combine high expectations with appropriate support and autonomy (Shogren et al., 2015). For Autistic children, staff-student relationships may be even more critical and fundamental in shaping school belonging, as this group of students receives more constant and dynamic support from adults (i.e. teachers, EAs, school staff) throughout a school day compared to non-disabled peers (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). Parents in the current study repeatedly highlighted the importance of the consistency and the quality of the support offered to their children. The broader literature describes the need for effective practices in modifying and adjusting the educational settings for Autistic students (Petersson-Bloom & Holmqvist, 2022; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Consistently implementing IEPs, recognizing unique levels of classroom-based supports (e.g., instructional accommodations and differentiated activities) and providing broader circles of support such as psychological and social work services, speech-language therapy, and occupational and physical therapy are example strategies in enhancing inclusivity. Collectively, findings point to the influence of school-related factors on belonging being less about grade level or placement itself, and more about the quality of students' everyday experiences within these contexts.

School Attendance Problems

School attendance emerged as a key determinant of Autistic students' sense of school belonging. Absenteeism had the strongest association with school belonging among the variables examined, with lower attendance associated with a reduced sense of belonging. That it is the strongest predictor of school belonging is not surprising. Students who attend school more regularly may have more opportunities to interact with staff and their peers, engage in academic and extracurricular events at school, and develop a stronger sense of being part of the school

community. Parent accounts highlighted how reduced attendance was frequently driven by school-based decisions that limit students' access to consistent participation and engagement with the school environment. Such school-based practices often emerged in response to unmet needs and inadequate supports and were enacted through modified schedules, early dismissals, and school-imposed attendance restrictions. Additionally, K-12 Autistic students' access to school was often conditional and fragmented. Participation in classroom activities, field trips, and even full school days was often contingent on behavioural expectations or parental involvement. These patterns suggest that reduced attendance often reflects underlying challenges in meeting students' needs within the school context, potentially as an outcome of insufficient or inconsistently implemented supports.

Research has long established the relation of school belonging with school attendance problems, social integration and academic achievement for both students with and without disabilities (Anderson, 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Pampati et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020). Further evidence suggests that school belonging and absenteeism are reciprocally related, such that reduced belonging predicts increased absenteeism and, in turn, absenteeism contributes to declines in belonging (Anderson, 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Pampati et al., 2020). Students' level of engagement with the school environment may partially explain this bidirectional relationship. Lower school attendance has been linked to reduced student involvement with the school environment, manifesting in decreased participation and lower attachment to school (Gottfried, 2014b). Student disengagement is often not solely an individual response but is closely linked to their experiences within the school environment, particularly when their needs are not adequately met. Schools which fail to satisfy students' basic psychological needs (e.g. autonomy, competence) may induce the onset of school refusal and poor academic achievement, with lack of perceived teacher support being a major risk factor (Filippello et al., 2019).

Within the context of students with disabilities, Autistic students are particularly vulnerable to higher school refusal and reduced attendance, with varying factors influencing students' consistent attendance (Black & Zablotzky, 2018; Totsika et al., 2020). It is also important to consider that a substantial proportion of participants in the current study reported their child having co-occurring disabilities in addition to autism. This reflects broader literature documenting high rates of co-occurring conditions among Autistic youth and suggests that

experiences of school belonging, exclusion, and attendance may be shaped through complex and intersecting support needs rather than autism in isolation (Lai et al., 2019; Totsika et al., 2020). Moreover, it is possible that limited understanding and awareness about autism may precipitate attendance issues in Autistic children (Nordin et al., 2024; Preece & Howley, 2018). Previous research has demonstrated that Autistic students' sensory sensitivities (e.g. feelings of overwhelm, sensory overload) are affected by school and classroom conditions such as the number of people, background noise, bright lighting, and unstructured scheduling (Gray et al., 2023). From a community attachment perspective, Autistic students' school belonging and the quality of peer and teacher relationships shape their school attendance dynamics. Negative perceptions towards neurodiversity, as well as problematic peer interactions and teachers' attitudes increased Autistic children's school refusal behaviour (Gray et al., 2023; Munkhaugen et al., 2017). Furthermore, Autistic students are at higher risk of bullying victimization relative to non-Autistic peers (Mañano et al., 2016), which can subsequently impact school attachment and nonattendance. Recent studies have positioned bullying as a key factor associated with patterns of school nonattendance for Autistic children (McClemont et al., 2021; Nordin et al., 2024; Ochi et al., 2020; Sproston et al., 2017). A substantial proportion of Autistic boys who reported being bullied also exhibited school refusal (Bitsika et al., 2021). Although the present study did not examine gender differences in relation to SAPs, families repeatedly raised concerns over their child developing school-related anxiety and emotionally based school avoidance in response to bullying and strained dynamics with school staff.

In addition to individual and relational factors, school-level factors also play a central role in shaping attendance. Parents expressed concerns about the availability of school-based supports, identifying this as both a factor influencing their decision to keep their child at home and instances in which schools advised home absence. Prior research has drawn on parent perspectives to document systemic difficulties in meeting the needs of students with disabilities (Anderson, 2021). Consistent with the current study's findings, parents often report lack of school staff's understanding and knowledge regarding specific disabilities and learning difficulties, insufficient qualified educators able to offer required supports, and challenges in receiving appropriate accommodations and inclusive teaching practices (Kurth et al., 2020; Murphy & Risser, 2022; Nordin et al., 2024). These barriers on a systemic school level can lead to inappropriate accommodations and insufficient responses to student needs, leading to elevated

student exclusions, emotional distress and behaviours, which may in turn reinforce patterns of emotionally based school avoidance over time (Andersen et al., 2025; Brede et al., 2017). Attendance problems can also emerge through institutional mechanisms. School-based practices themselves may restrict students' access to education through forms of informal or structural exclusion. School-initiated exclusion, which operates outside formal disciplinary measures, can take the form of reduced timetables, partial exclusions, modified school days, early dismissals, conditional attendance arrangements, exclusion from activities etc. (Totsika et al., 2020). These practices disproportionately affect students with disabilities, including Autistic students, who are more likely to experience disruptions to full-time participation in school (Adams, 2022; Martin-Denham, 2022; O'Hagan et al., 2021; Schneider et al., 2025). Both in the literature and in the current study's parental accounts, a history of school boards' informal use of part-time schedules or early dismissals has been documented in depth (Brede et al., 2017). These patterns are not solely inherent to autism and are often linked to challenges in meeting students' needs within the classroom, including limited staff capacity, insufficient supports, and difficulties managing complex behavioural or learning needs (Blackwell, 2025). This may lead to students being physically present only part-time or excluded from key aspects of school life, limiting opportunities for participation, access to learning opportunities, and peer and teacher interaction, which are key determinants for developing a sense of school belonging. Implications of failing to include Autistic children in school, which can involve unofficial partial exclusions like part-time attendance, can induce serious negative effects on students' behavior, anxiety, depression, and psychological well-being (Brede et al., 2017). In addition to impacts on students' academic and social development, families frequently experienced the consequences of school-initiated exclusions including employment interruptions, financial pressures, time constraints, and decline in mental health (Blackwell, 2025). While research has also found that modified scheduling can be beneficial for Autistic students' academic and social developments (Richter et al., 2025), it is important that the acceptance and application of varied attendance is based on individualized needs and does not reflect decisions driven by a lack of support availability in schools. In light of the present study's findings on SAPs and school belonging, consistent access to and engagement with the school environment is critical for fostering students' sense of school belonging.

Theoretical Interpretation

It is evident that Autistic students' experiences within the school environment, including interactions with teachers, peers, and the broader systemic processes, play a pivotal role in shaping their sense of attachment to school. This is in line with Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) bioecological systems theory which posits that child development is influenced by contextual frameworks they live in and the environmental forces they interact with, which are reciprocally shaped by these nested social systems. The conceptualization of schools as ecological systems considers both relational dynamics (e.g., peer and teacher interactions) and broader systemic contexts (e.g., school practices and structures) in shaping students' experiences of participation, inclusion, and school belonging. Understanding schools as such ecological systems requires examining the meso (e.g. personal relationships) and the macro (e.g. culture) systems within which they operate to better understand the dynamics of learning and education. Students' day-to-day experiences within classrooms, especially peer and teacher relationships, access to supports, and opportunities for participation within the classroom directly influenced their sense of inclusion and exclusion. For example, parent perceptions allowed a deeper insight into Autistic children's host of emotional, behavioural, academic, and social challenges, which together contributed to difficulties in feeling included, attending, and functioning at school. At the mesosystem level, interactions between families and schools, including parent-school communication, ongoing parental advocacy, collaboration around supports such as IEPs, played an important role in shaping students' school experiences emerged. The current study's findings also pointed to how broader as well as school-based structures and supports, including the availability of resources, staff capacity, and institutional practices, influenced how supports were implemented and how students were able to access and engage with the school environment. Collectively, school belonging emerges not solely an individual perception, but as an outcome of how effectively these interconnected systems support students' participation and inclusion within the school context.

Considered an application of the bioecological systems theory, the present study is also grounded in the KiTeS framework (Melvin et al., 2019) which provides a more focused lens for understanding school attendance as a process shaped by multiple protective and risk factors. The findings of this study confirmed existing literature which illustrates the multidirectional interplay of contextual variables which molds children's attendance patterns. In the present study,

attendance did not function as an isolated variable, but reflected students' capacity to access and engage with the school environment. Consistent with KiTeS, attendance was closely linked to relational, environmental, and support-related conditions, including peer and teacher relationships, the consistency of supports, and the extent to which students' needs were met within the classroom and other school activities. When conditions were present, students were more likely to attend, connect and participate in school life. Conversely, when supports and practices were inconsistent, inappropriate or exclusionary, reduced attendance emerged. In this sense, attendance can be understood as a key pathway through which students' opportunities to develop a sense of belonging are either facilitated or constrained, as limited access to participation and interaction restricts the conditions under which belonging is formed. Moreover, utilizing the KiTeS model also allowed in-depth insight into the particular experiences of Autistic children as a student population. Findings showed that Autistic children often experienced multiple risk factors which placed them at heightened risk for school exclusion practices, attendance problems, social isolation and the adverse effects that accompany such difficulties. Guided by the theoretical frameworks outlined above, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of school belonging and the complex interplay of contextual factors that shape these experiences.

Limitations

The current study, while offering valuable insights into Autistic students' lived experiences in school environments from parental perspectives, has several limitations which are important to consider. First, the demographics reported by the participants do not reflect the cultural or ethnic diversity of Ontario, the province in which the survey and study took place. In addition, parents who participated in the study were resourced in ways that other parents might not be. Participants had access to technology (e.g., devices, internet) as well as the time and relevant skills (e.g., spoke English or French, were able to navigate the text and virtual survey platform) to complete the survey. Future research should prioritize recruitment of underrepresented communities for a more diverse sample. This could be achieved through establishing partnerships with organizations, offering languages beyond English and French, promoting the study through both in-person and online platforms.

Another important point to note is that the survey solely focused on parent perspectives and did not investigate or utilize other sources of information via alternative perspectives (e.g.,

of the child or school). Parent-perception is valuable and key to understanding the experiences of students as caregivers typically know their children best and are the ones receiving calls from school to report issues. However, their reports of exclusion, belonging or absenteeism are based on their own recollections and may not be entirely accurate. Parent views of school belonging capture what they have heard from their child and observed at school but may not fully reflect the child's experience or feelings about school. The voices of students themselves will be key to better understanding relationships between school belonging and all other variables in future research. Future research could adopt more contextually grounded and multi-perspective approaches to better capture students' sense of school belonging. For example, qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, classroom-based observations, or ethnographic approaches could provide richer insight into how belonging is experienced within everyday school interactions and environments. Observing how students engage with peers, teachers, and classroom activities in situ may offer a more nuanced understanding of the processes through which belonging is fostered or undermined. Additionally, school staff, who are also observing students' sense of belonging to the school community, inclusion, exclusions, and attendance problems in multiple ways, should be included to provide a fuller picture of the processes involved as well as potential impacts. Comparing these perspectives with those of parents and school staff could further illuminate how belonging is interpreted and supported across different stakeholders.

One other limitation was with respect to disability identity and identifications. The research team behind the survey had originally intended to explore analyses focused on specific disabilities in relation to belonging, exclusion and SAPs but were faced with the majority of respondents indicating that their child had multiple disabilities, making straightforward and ethical groupings by disability impossible. Multiple diagnoses are the reality for many families and students, and particularly relevant for Autistic children. Thus, this issue needs to be further explored in future studies in order to allow for possible disaggregation and identification of disability-specific experiences.

This study did not account for all demographic and contextual variables that may have influenced the relationships observed across findings. Importantly with regards to the qualitative analysis, the two questions participants were asked to respond to at the end of the survey did not specifically ask about the variables of interest (i.e., sense of school belonging, grade and class

placement, school attendance problems, family demographics). Although these were open-ended questions, responses tended to be quite short which did not lend itself to a deductive analysis. It is recommended that future research include multiple sources of data and take into consideration other variables that may affect the relationships between sense of belonging to school, absenteeism, school- and family- related factors.

Conclusion

Evident in the discussion of the findings of this study, the nature of school belonging among Autistic students is complex and context dependent. Students' sense of belonging emerged as closely tied to their everyday experiences within school environments, including the quality of relationships with peers and staff, opportunities for meaningful participation, and the extent to which their needs were recognized and supported. Rather than being shaped by a single factor, belonging appeared to reflect the cumulative influence of relational, academic, and environmental conditions within schools. Within this broader context, school attendance problems were embedded in and reflective of these same dynamics. Reduced attendance was often not an isolated issue, but one that intersected with students' experiences of exclusion, unmet needs, and difficulties engaging with the school environment. This reinforces the importance of understanding attendance and belonging as interconnected processes, where barriers to participation may both stem from and contribute to a diminished sense of connection to school.

The findings also point to the critical role of school-based conditions in shaping students' experiences. In particular, the quality, consistency, and availability of supports emerged as central to both attendance and belonging outcomes. Strengthening inclusive practices within schools such as more responsive anti-bullying efforts, greater collaboration with families in the development and implementation of IEPs, increased accountability in ensuring supports are enacted, and enhanced resourcing for support staff may be key to improving students' school experiences. Addressing these areas has the potential to reduce exclusionary practices and promote more equitable and supportive learning environments for Autistic students. Inclusive education beyond integration and providing support on multiple levels of school to foster a sense of belonging to their school community is particularly relevant for Autistic students (Hebron & Humphrey, 2014; Hebron, 2018). According to Autistic youth, inclusion means feeling like they belong, are valued and wanted by peers and teachers, have access to fair and sufficient support to

be able to thrive in their school life. In other words, “inclusion is a feeling (a sense of belonging), not a place (mainstream or otherwise)” (Goodall, 2020).

School belonging appears to be especially salient for students experiencing multiple stressors or forms of marginalization. Autistic students’ lived experiences are essential for informing appropriate clinical, educational, and policy interventions (Ducarre, 2025; Zeedyk et al., 2016). Importantly, inclusion extends beyond physical placement within mainstream settings; rather, it reflects students’ sense of being accepted, supported, and meaningfully engaged within their school communities. In this sense, belonging is not simply a structural outcome, but an experiential one, shaped through everyday interactions and access to appropriate supports.

The study contributes to ongoing conversations in inclusive education by offering an insight into how school belonging is shaped within the context of exclusion and support, as well as how school environments can better support Autistic students’ well-being and inclusion. By examining both school belonging and exclusion, the findings offer a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions that support or hinder positive school experiences. These insights may inform the work of educators, policymakers, and researchers by supporting the development of more responsive school-based practices and interventions. In particular, greater attention to belonging and exclusion may: (a) deepen understanding of Autistic students’ school experiences, (b) inform the design of more effective educational strategies and supports, and (c) help mitigate the negative impacts of exclusion while promoting more inclusive and positive school environments.

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Appendix A
Ontario School Inclusion Survey

Demographics
Q2. Did your child/children attend or were enrolled at school in Ontario in 2022-2023? ☐ Yes ☐ No
Q3. How many children do you have living in your household? ☐ 1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7+
Q4. Are you the child(ren)'s ☐ Mother ☐ Father ☐ Grandparent ☐ Other (please specify) _____
Q5. Are you filling out more than one survey, for more than one school-aged child with disabilities, neurodiversities and/or exceptionalities? ☐ No ☐ Yes – for 2 children ☐ Yes – for 3 children ☐ Yes – for 4 children ☐ Yes – for more than 4 children

Q6. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ☐ University graduate degree (Masters, PhD)
- ☐ University degree
- ☐ College/apprenticeship certificate or diploma
- ☐ High school diploma or equivalent
- ☐ Less than high school

Q7. What is the language that you first learned at home in childhood and still understand?

- ☐ English
 - ☐ French
 - ☐ ASL/LSQ
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
- _____

Q8. What is the language that your child first learned at home and still understands?

- ☐ English
 - ☐ French
 - ☐ ASL/LSQ
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
- _____

Q9. Where was your child born?

- ☐ Canada
- ☐ Outside of Canada

Q10. How would you describe your race, ethnicity and/or cultural background?

- First Nations
 - Métis
 - Inuk (Inuit)
 - White
 - East Asian (e.g. Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese descent)
 - South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan)
 - Black
 - Middle Eastern (e.g. Arab, Persian, West Asian descent, Afghan, Egyptian, Iranian etc.)
 - Latin American
 - Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Filipino, Thai)
 - Other group (please specify)
-

Q11. How would you describe your child's race, ethnicity and/or cultural background?

- First Nations
 - Métis
 - Inuk (Inuit)
 - White
 - East Asian (e.g. Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese descent)
 - South Asian (e.g., East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan)
 - Black
 - Middle Eastern (e.g. Arab, Persian, West Asian descent, Afghan, Egyptian, Iranian etc.)
 - Latin American
 - Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Filipino, Thai)
 - Other group (please specify)
-

Q12. What is your child's current age?

- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6
- ☐ 7
- ☐ 8
- ☐ 9
- ☐ 10
- ☐ 11
- ☐ 12
- ☐ 13
- ☐ 14
- ☐ 15
- ☐ 16
- ☐ 17
- ☐ 18
- ☐ 19
- ☐ 20
- ☐ 21

Q13. What is your child's current grade (2022-2023 school year)?

- ☐ Kindergarten
- ☐ Grade 1
- ☐ Grade 2
- ☐ Grade 3
- ☐ Grade 4
- ☐ Grade 5
- ☐ Grade 6
- ☐ Grade 7
- ☐ Grade 8
- ☐ Grade 9
- ☐ Grade 10
- ☐ Grade 11
- ☐ Grade 12

Q14. Which of the following best describes your child's gender?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Gender non-conforming
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Q15. Which of the following best describes your family's income:

- ☐ Under 30,000
- ☐ 30,000 to 60,000
- ☐ 60,001 to 90,000
- ☐ Over 90,000
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Current School Information**Q16. Has your child attended school in-person at some point in 2022/2023?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q17. Has your child been identified within any of the following Ontario Ministry of Education identifications? (Check all that apply).

- ☐ Autism
 - ☐ Behaviour
 - ☐ Blind and Low Vision
 - ☐ Deaf and Hard of Hearing
 - ☐ Developmental Disability
 - ☐ Giftedness
 - ☐ Language Impairment
 - ☐ Learning Disability
 - ☐ Mild Intellectual Disability
 - ☐ Multiple Exceptionalities
 - ☐ Physical Disability
 - ☐ Speech Impairment
 - ☐ IEP only – no formal Identification, Placement and Review Process (IPRC)
 - ☐ Academic or social-emotional challenges at school not associated with a disability/neurodiversity/exceptionality
 - ☐ My child doesn't have any academic or social-emotional challenges at school
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
- _____

Q18. Does your child attend a publicly funded or privately funded school?

- ☐ Publicly funded school
 - ☐ Privately funded school
 - ☐ On reserve/First Nations school
 - ☐ Other (please specify)
- _____

Q19. If your child attends a publicly funded school, in which school board is your child enrolled?

- ☐ Drop down menu of Ontario school boards (group authorities/hospital schools etc.) + other option for private + other option for FN

Q20. What situation best describes your child's current class placement?

- In a special education **school** all of the time
- In a special education **class** all of the time
- In special education class(es) **most of the time** (more than half the day, but at least one period in a regular class)
- In regular class(es) at times and special education class(es) at times (one period or more but less than half the day)
- In regular class(es) full time with support from special education or resource staff
- In regular class(es) full time with support from the teacher(s) if necessary

SECTION 2: SCHOOL EXCLUSION

This section asks about your child's experiences with inclusion and exclusion in the 2022-2023 school year.

By 'excluded' we mean told they couldn't attend school for some time, they were not able to go on a field trip or take part in a school activity, they were suspended or expelled, or they felt left out in some way.

Q21. How often does your child enjoy attending their school?

- Never (1)
- Rarely (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Often (4)
- Always (5)

Q22. How often does your child feel like they are valued by school staff at school?

- Never (1)
- Rarely (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Often (4)
- Always (5)

Q23. How often does your child feel like they are accepted by their peers at school?

- ☐ Never (1)
- ☐ Rarely (2)
- ☐ Sometimes (3)
- ☐ Often (4)
- ☐ Always (5)

Q24. Did your child attend school on a part-time or modified basis this school year? (e.g., is scheduled to leave school at lunch time or only attends for the afternoon)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q25. Why did your child attend school part-time or on a modified schedule?

Q26. Please select how many hours per day your child attends school:

- ☐ 1-2 hours/day
- ☐ 2-3 hours/day
- ☐ 3-4 hours/day
- ☐ 4-5 hours/day
- ☐ 5-6 hours/day

Q27. How long has this schedule been in place for your child?

- ☐ All of the school year
- ☐ More than half of the school year (5 months or more)
- ☐ For 3-5 months
- ☐ For 1-2 months

Q28. Below are some reasons why children miss school. Please choose the reasons that best explain any absences for your child (pick all that apply).

- ☐ My child was reluctant or avoided school (e.g., my child said it was hard to go to school, or stay there the whole day; my child seemed upset/anxious/scared about school).
- ☐ I gave my child a day off (e.g. to give my child a rest)
- ☐ I decided to keep my child home because **I feel** as though the school is not meeting my child's needs (e.g., my child's supports were not available such as

nurses, EAs, and specialized transportation; because the school is not helping my child).

- The **school asked** my child to stay away from school (e.g., because the school could not take care of my child's needs, because the school could not keep my child safe at school).
- The **school sent my child home** because of a lack of sufficient staff or resources (e.g. not enough Eas)
- The **school sent my child home** due to their behaviour (e.g., my child was suspended or expelled; my child was asked to leave school for the remainder of the day).
- Any other reason (please specify):

Q29. Of these, which one reason best describes why your child is absent from school most of the time?

- My child was reluctant or avoided school
- I gave my child a day off
- I decided to keep my child home because **I feel** as though the school is not meeting my child's needs
- The **school asked** my child to stay away from school
- The **school sent my child home** because of a lack of sufficient staff or resources
- The **school sent my child home** due to their behaviour
- Any other reason (please specify):

Q30. Please estimate how often your child has missed school this year for any reason (including sickness, disciplinary actions, lack of available supports, etc.). Try to estimate the days even if they usually missed a ½ day or a couple of hours per day.

- One day per month or less (10 or less days over the school year)
- Two days per month/One day every couple of weeks (10-20 days over the school year)
- Three days per month/Almost one day per week (30-40 days over the school year)

- More than 1 day per week (40 or more days)

Q31. How often has your child been excluded from academic events or opportunities at school this year?

- Never (1)
- Rarely (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Often (4)
- Always (5)

Q32. How often has your child been excluded from extracurricular or social events at school this year?

- Never (1)
- Rarely (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Often (4)
- Always (5)

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Q55. What else do you want to share with us about your experience with school-based inclusion, exclusion, restraints or seclusion for your child in 2022/2023?

Q56. What else do you want to share with us about your experience with school-based inclusion, exclusion, restraints or seclusion for your child in years other than 2022/2023?
